MASTER'S STUDENT ATTRITION AT SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY:
A PORTRAIT

By

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MASTERS' STUDENT ATTRITION AT S.F.U.: A PORTRAIT

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ABSTRACT

Approximately 30% of Canadian master's degree students withdraw before degree completion. Such students may face career and associated economic and social disadvantages as well as personal costs like damaged self-esteem and ability to be productive.

The main purpose of this study was to describe and understand the experience of withdrawal from master's programs from the perspective of the leavers themselves. This research had two stages. The first involved a system-wide statistical portrait of master's student leaving at Simon Fraser University over a 5 year period; this portrait identified general trends, patterns and suggested possible explanations. To reach a more thorough understanding of the nature of students' experiences and the leaving process, the second stage involved detailed micro analyses based on extended focused interviews with 12 former Simon Fraser University master's students.

The statistical analysis indicated that the patterns and trends of attrition at Simon Fraser University generally mirror those described in other literature. For example, younger students complete their programs at a higher rate and tend to be found in well-funded, full-time, low-attrition departments mainly in the natural and applied sciences where time to completion rates are also the shortest.

Analysis of the extended interviews included individual composite portraits of the former students followed by thematic analysis. The central theme in leavers' stories was a perceived lack of support and caring at the departmental and supervisory committee level. At the departmental level, lack of support and caring was manifested in the degree of physical, emotional, academic and intellectual support provided. At the supervisory committee level, it was manifested in a lack of supervisor availability, interest and practical guidance particularly at the conceptualization stage of thesis development.

The dominant conclusion was that Simon Fraser University needs to take a more comprehensive institutional stance toward a supportive and caring educational environment. Specifically, this means giving the role of supervision higher status and providing consciousness raising seminars for senior supervisors. Other policies and actions recommended include provision of appropriate methods courses in which students complete their thesis/project proposal, an effective evaluation and student feedback system, and sponsoring students in such a way as to allow full-time studies for the first two years.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my husband John and my children Robin and Vanessa who endured my neglect without complaint and supported me during my graduate study.

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Background and Statement of the Problem

Credentialism in Our Society

> Education is the most important determinant
> yet discovered of how far one will go in
> today's world. Moreover, it has been growing
> steadily more important in the sense that
> each new generation . . . has spent more and
> more time in schools and taken jobs with higher
> educational requirements. (Collins, 1979, p.3)

What is the perceived value of a master's degree? For

many the decision to attend graduate school is based on a

strong interest in a particular field and career which

requires advanced education and training. Another reason

is what LaPidus (1989) calls "defensive credentialing".

Because many people have baccalaureate degrees, individuals

feel that a master's degree will distinguish them from

others in their field and thus protect their job security

as well as increase opportunities for career advancement.

In addition, there is what can be termed "discontinuities

in career ladders" (LaPidus, 1989). It is no longer

possible in most fields to start at the bottom and work

one's way up. To function as a professional in almost all

fields, it is necessary to attend graduate school and

obtain certification. In sum, many individuals seek a

master's degree because of its employment value; they "want

a decent job" (Collins, 1979). Thus, the meaning of master's education reflects social changes in our society. The OECD (1987) report describes it this way:

> The ... intermediate degree was prompted by employment considerations: the need in certain fields for people with advanced training and some knowledge of research methods. This shift over fifteen years, from a licentiat reflecting the perceived exigencies of scholarship to a licentiat reflecting the perceived exigencies of the labour market, encapsulates much that has happened in the field of post-graduate education. (p.8)

> Pressure from the community for higher credentials

provides a strong incentive for individuals to continue their education.

> Because higher education stands strategically between the elite occupations and those who aspire to them, its degrees become prime incentives to prospective and enrolled students. (Stodt & Theilens, 1985, p.252)

There is a trend for almost every field to develop a master's program specific to that field. In Canada, the majority of graduate students are registered in master's programs which qualify them for a host of vocations and professions. The Healy (1978) report to The Canada Council acknowledges that, "The number and diversity of master's programs and the high enrollment in them are evidence of their importance" (p.52). The trend toward increased enrollment in master's programs both for the professions and for scholarly careers continues in Canada (Higgs, 1987).

We live in a credentialed society. Therefore it is almost never in the best interest of a student to discontinue his or her studies before degree completion.

Failure to achieve the formal end-qualifications has

serious consequences for the student:

> It is known that employers generally do not
> select employees on the basis of their school
> grades; rather, they look for the completion
> of a degree in particular subjects. (Collins,
> 1979, p.20)

Master's students who fail to graduate face career, and

associated economic and social disadvantages in our society

where educational credentials differentiate the work force.

For example, individuals with graduate degrees enjoy what

is generally considered to be full employment.

Unemployment rates are less than one half of those for the

labor force as a whole (CAGS report, 1987). The

"professionalization" of work means that individuals who

have the potential to contribute significantly to society

cannot unless they have the necessary academic

qualifications.

In addition, master's students who spend considerable

time and effort before withdrawing from a program may face

personal losses in terms of damaged self-esteem and ability

to be productive, a personal loss which is felt in the

community as a whole.

> Those years are more than waste: each succeeding
> one bores into one's strength making it harder
> and harder to walk away whole and get on to
> another task or profession where the prognosis
> is better and interest higher. (Sternberg,
> 1981, p.33)

Of course, it is true that for some students the

decision to leave may not have unfavorable consequences.

Leaving may constitute a positive action and may be in the

student's best interest if the desired goal for attending
university has been achieved or if alternate channels for
personal development have been discovered or if vocational
plans and interests have changed. However, for a large
proportion of leavers the decision is likely perceived as a
loss, even if only the loss of former expectations. At the
extreme, it may involve the frustration of unfulfilled
goals and ambitions and may be marked by depression, loss
of confidence and a sense of failure (Cope & Hannah, 1975).

The Challenge to Our Universities

As Canada moves quickly into a knowledge and
technological-intensive society and economy, our
universities play an increasingly important part in
Canada's future.

> Knowledge is becoming a key international
> commodity and its productive application
> is increasingly determining the future
> competitive success and consequent
> standard of living, of whole nations.
> (CAGS Report, 1987, p.i)

Canada's ability to compete in the international
market-place is primarily embodied in its highly qualified
people, who are mainly graduates of our universities.
Between 1971 and 1981 there was an 88% growth in the number
of master's and Ph.D. holders in all occupations. Yet, the
demand for highly qualified people continues to exceed the
supply (CAGS report, 1987). The pressures on our
universities to respond more directly to Canada's economic
and social needs continues to grow.

> While it is true that the university does not
> perceive vocational training as one of its
> primary functions, it is equally true that
> both those who finance the universities and
> those who consider attending it, are
> increasingly evaluating the university in
> terms of its ability to produce marketable
> manpower. (Pascal & Kanowitch, 1979 p.1)

Our universities face another challenge. Beginning in
the mid-1990's, Canadian universities will face serious
faculty shortages due in part to the retirement of large
numbers of teaching staff (CAGS report, 1987; Renner,
1988). Bowen's keynote address to the Association of
Universities and Colleges of Canada (as reported in
University Affairs, 1990), points to other trends which
help to account for this development. Though enrollment
remains steady (and, indeed, is growing in Canada), major
shifts from arts and sciences to other disciplines such as
business and engineering have taken place. At the same
time, the number of doctorates awarded in the humanities
has fallen drastically since 1972. Another trend is the
considerable competition for persons with doctorates in the
private sector. This flow out of academe has been steady
over the years.

What can be done about this problem of supply? Bowen
suggests, "We can talk about all kinds of adjustment
mechanisms, but I am persuaded there is only one - to
improve the effectiveness of graduate education," which he
states is "in a deplorable condition; the rate of
completion of the PhD is scandalously low" (p.3). Since
the Master's degree, in most cases, is a prerequisite to

doing doctoral work, the health of master's education has an indirect impact on the number of academics who will be available in these critical times ahead. Therefore let us turn our attention to the state of master's education.

The State of Master's Education

According to the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 1987) report, noncompletion at the graduate level is a major and growing problem in a number of countries. Statistics Canada (1987) figures estimate that 30% of master's degree students discontinue their studies before completing a degree. At Simon Fraser University, master's students leave at an overall rate of 30% with vastly differing attrition rates represented in the various departments (Bowman, 1985; Clayman, 1990). Clearly, master's candidates are leaving in large numbers.

The OECD report indicates that noncompletion is much more acute in the social sciences and humanities than in the "hard" sciences. Cude (1987) proposes that this is because the methodologies in the social sciences and humanities are much less precise and a student must rely on a committee to reach consensus about what constitutes an acceptable piece of work. According to Tinto (1989, private communication), "life in graduate schools is... centered around the Department and program. As a result, micro-interactional issues and questions of local climates are likely to be... important to persistence."

The need for additional research about the attrition of master's students is well documented (Baird, 1988; Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Katz & Hartnett, 1976; Malaney, 1987). Although studies of attrition (Rudd, 1985) have sometimes included master's students with doctoral students, little research has been devoted exclusively to master's students. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the master's degree is largely construed as preparatory work toward a Ph.D. program and not a goal in itself. Part of the reason may also be found in the logistical problems involved in the design of such studies. Perhaps, too, information about attrition is a painful reminder that all is not well in the halls of higher learning. Nevertheless, there are long-standing criticisms that not enough research is devoted to master's education. For example, Hauptman (1986) states, "master's students are virtually an unknown quantity despite the fact that those students represent by far the largest component of advanced degree enrollments" (p. xiii).

Definition of Master's Attrition

The definition of student attrition can be perplexing (Tinto, 1987). For example, should persons who persist in their studies but fail to complete their degree requirements within the five year limit be considered leavers? For the purposes of this study a master's leaver is considered to be any graduate student who has been

accepted into a graduate program and undertaken some units, but who has not earned a degree and is no longer registered in the graduate program. Thus, both voluntary and "required" withdrawal are included in the definition. (The vast majority of leavers at the master's level do so voluntarily.)

Purpose of Study

Universities cost Canadian taxpayers over $5 billion a year (Canada Yearbook, 1988, 4-5). In a time of shrinking financial support and limited resources of all kinds, noncompletion and its causes is a major issue in current discussion of post-graduate education. The assumption underlying the discussion is that "it is wasteful, reflects failings in the system, and has to be minimized through policy measures" (OECD, 1987, p.51).

However, master's noncompletion raises questions that do not simply have to do with financial cost nor simply with efficient management of a problem. There are questions that have to do with particular individuals in particular circumstances that conspire against their graduate completion. Why do so many voluntarily start something they do not finish? What happens to them once they enroll? What is it like for those people? Why do they find graduate studies so difficult when others can finish quite easily? How can we understand the experience

of particular individuals who are represented by the figures of this attrition problem?

The purpose of this study is two-fold. The first is to determine some of the reasons for nonsuccess in the master's degree programs at Simon Fraser University. To this end, the question, "Who leaves and why?" is posed. The answer to this question is explored through a statistically reliable study of the trends and patterns of master's students' progress at Simon Fraser University over the past five years. This constitutes the exploration phase of the study.

The second and more important purpose, is to research the "lifeworld" of particular students who leave master's programs. To reach a more complete understanding of the nature of students' experiences and the leaving process, thorough interviews are used. In this way insight will be gained about the general climate for leavers and their experiences in trying to pursue graduate education. This constitutes the understanding phase of the study.

What does it mean to be a master's leaver? Is the decision to leave primarily influenced by the departmental features of the university or the individual characteristics of the people who come to these programs? Is the decision to leave a function of environmental press issues such as family responsibilities and job considerations? And what constitutes the act of "deciding"? By examining the experiences of the students

it is expected that some understanding will emerge of the world of graduate students and why they make the decisions they do.

It is hoped that this study's findings will contribute to our present meager understanding of the nature of the master's leaving process in a Canadian context. This study's findings may be used to alert potential graduate students to some of the experiences and difficulties they may encounter as graduate students. In addition, this study may assist graduate leavers or students considering leaving to gain greater understanding of their own graduate experience and perhaps give them reasons for why they might complete their program. Finally, the findings of this study may help universities to be more responsive to the needs of their graduate students.

Method

The exploratory study which investigated the experiences of master's student leavers was carried out at Simon Fraser University in the fall of 1990 and spring of 1991. Participants were drawn from the graduate registrar's list of master's students who failed to register for the summer, and fall semesters of 1990 and spring semester of 1991. The sample was obtained on a volunteer basis.

Data collection focussed on three areas:

(1) To put this study into context, summary statistics regarding Simon Fraser University master's student progress were collected with the cooperation of Dr. Bruce Clayman, Dean of Graduate studies.

(2) To identify overall reasons for noncompletion and willingness to participate in an in-depth interview, a questionnaire was mailed to all summer and fall 1990 and spring 1991 master's student leavers from Simon Fraser University. Returned questionnaires were to have been analyzed by using content analysis methods but due to the low response rate, this part of the study was abandoned.

(3) The main purpose of this study was to create an understanding or knowledge of the master's leaver's experience. To this end, the personal stories of twelve master's student leavers were obtained. Participants conversed with the investigator for approximately two hours duration. The 'focussed' interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The data were analyzed through the methods appropriate to qualitative data analysis, the development of perspectives, and the writing of 'portraits' to characterize the experience of these students as graduate students.

Limitations

This thesis is concerned with master's student attrition from the perspective of master's student leavers. Who are the students who fail to earn the master's degrees

to which they have aspired and toward which they have spent anywhere from one semester to five years of time and energy? What are their experiences? These questions remain largely unexplored.

It may be that generalizations about master's student leavers are situation-specific. Until more studies are conducted in different university settings, generalizations about the experiences of those who do not complete a master's degree can only be tentative. However, statistics show that the general extent and pattern of master's student attrition at Simon Fraser University is similar to other universities in the western world (OECD, 1987). Therefore, the results of this and other local studies may be useful in the broader context.

Whereas a longitudinal study design involving collection of data about the same persons at different points in time would have been most desirable, this was not feasible in terms of available financial and time resources. Instead, a cross-sectional retrospective case study approach was used. Only recent leavers were interviewed. Perhaps changes in leavers' perceptions and insights over a year's or several years' time could be quite revealing. However, these leavers would be even less accessible to investigation than recent leavers and were not included in the study.

This study is highly personal and sensitive in nature. Therefore questions regarding the credibility of leavers'

self-reports arise. For example, leavers may have reason to lie or conceal some of what they see as the truth in order to maintain self-esteem and present an image of worthiness. I believe, however, that my own status as master's candidate and the sensitivity and empathy I brought to the interviews helped to create an atmosphere of trust and openness allowing for candid self-disclosures.

Organization of Thesis

Chapter I outlines the background and purpose of this study. Chapter II provides the literature review, followed by a description of the methodology of the study in Chapter III. Chapter IV contains a statistical portrait of Simon Fraser University master's student progress over five years. Chapter V analyzes the findings through the 'portraits' of master's student leavers and a thematic analysis of their experience. The final chapter contains the discussion and implications.

Chapter II

Review of the Literature

How have researchers understood master's attrition? This chapter reviews the various ways in which researchers have conceptualized the graduate experience and understood leaving at the master's and doctoral level. I am not entering this inquiry with preconceived hypotheses about why leaving occurs. Rather I wish to remain open to all possible understandings of the leaving process through the use of "multiple working hypotheses" as described by Chamberlin (1965). This literature review gives rise to numerous "foreshadowed" explanations about what may go wrong for students who do not complete their master's degree. These foreshadowed problems will assist me in taking a broad view of the experiences of master's student leavers and their decision to withdraw and will hopefully result in a clearer, more focussed understanding of the leaving process.

Background

The concentration of research on first year undergraduate students limits our knowledge as to whether the process of attrition for master's students differs in important ways. For example, attrition at the undergraduate level takes place mainly in the first year

whereas at the graduate level there seems to be a special kind of attrition - attrition by "extended duration" (Tucker, 1964).

It is a common belief that only candidates who are qualified and capable of graduate work are selected into master's and doctoral programs. Therefore it is not clear at first blush why there should be many graduate leavers at all. Research has, however, uncovered a great many themes associated with graduate attrition: 1) poor supervision, 2) the student's academic quality, 3) financial concerns, 4) family responsibilities, 5) interference of paid work, 6) lack of knowledge of research techniques, 7) problems with the research itself, 8) full-time or part-time status, 9) field of study and 10) motivational factors - i.e.: no clear purpose in taking up graduate studies. The implication of these studies is that the phenomenon is complex, with part of the understanding to be found in the institution of learning, part to be found in the external environment and part to be found within the students themselves.

Research into graduate attrition, particularly at the master's level, is scant and comes mainly from Europe and Australia with American studies largely devoted to women and minorities in graduate study. While there was a flurry of American research into graduate education in the 1960's and 1970's (Berelson, 1960; Heiss, 1970; Feldman, 1974; Katz & Hartnett, 1976) there is little current research in

this area. For example, in Malaney's (1987) review of the literature on research on graduate students from 1977 - 1987, he found only two articles devoted to graduate attrition. The attrition studies conducted with graduate students have been largely descriptive. Until recently, no theoretical model has been available to guide attrition research on the master's student.

Theories and Models of Attrition

Graduate attrition. Girves & Wemmerus (1988) developed two empirical models which predict progress toward master's and doctoral degrees. Their model of master's student progress is based on American 1-2 year master's programs involving graded courses only. Since Canadian master's programs often involve a thesis or major paper requirement and generally take longer than two years to complete, Girves & Wemmerus' model for Ph.D. students is more applicable to the Canadian master's students' experience and is reproduced below.

This model which explains 29% of the variance in doctoral degree progress is built upon the undergraduate theoretical and empirical work of Spady (1971), Tinto (1975), Pascarella (1980), and Bean (1980) and includes important elements of the graduate experience, namely the student/advisor relationship and financial support. The model indicates that academic integration (involvement in one's program) directly influences doctoral degree

progress.   Involvement is a function of students'
perceptions of their relationship with faculty and
financial support in the form of research and teaching
assistantships. In addition, department characteristics
such as norms and expectations and attitudes of faculty
also directly influence degree progress.

Model 1: Empirical Model of Doctoral Student Degree Progress

DEPARTMENT CHARACTERISTICS

STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS

GRADES

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

INVOLVEMENT

PERCEPTIONS OF THE FACULTY

SATISFACTION/ ALIENATION
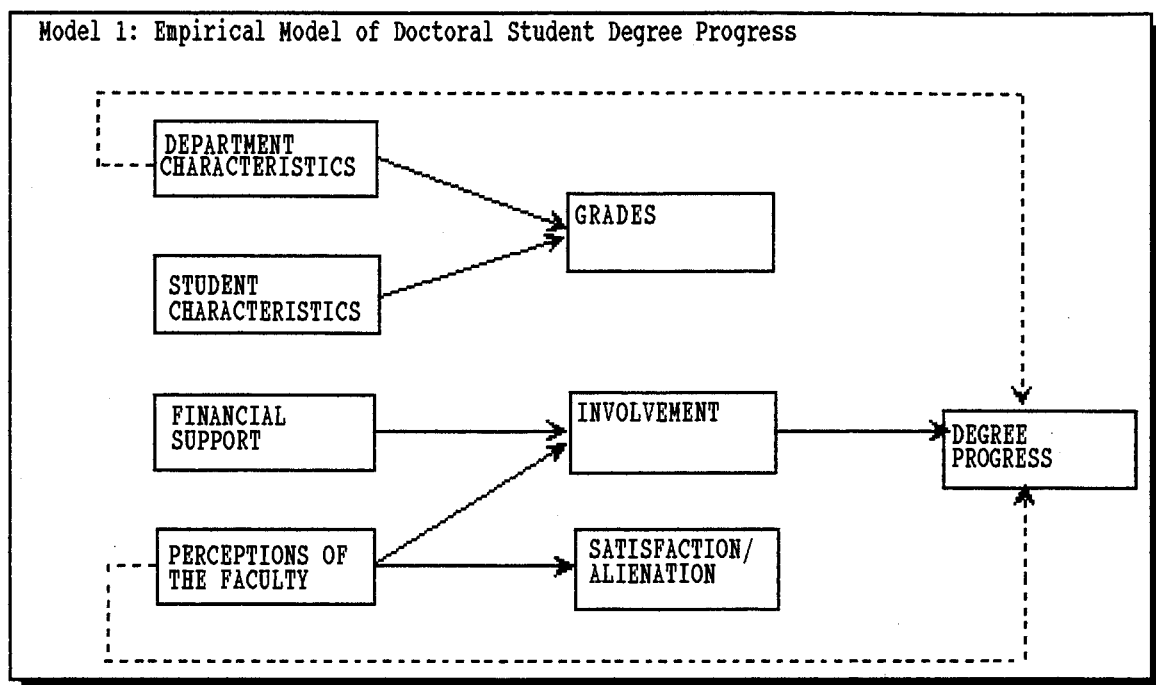
DEGREE PROGRESS

Note: Solid lines represent significance at the .01
level and dashed lines represent significance at the
.05 level.

Note: From "Developing Models of Graduate Student
Degree Progress" by J. Girves and V. Wemmerus,
1988. Journal of Higher Education, 59,2, p. 179.
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Press. Reprinted by permission of Jean Girves.

According to this model student/faculty relationships
appear to be critical to degree progress since they both

directly and indirectly affect progress. What is not clear is which aspects of the student/faculty relationship are critical in influencing progress. This lack of clarity is due to the model being too general and lacking an appropriate level of detail. While this model is an adequate starting point, it needs to be refined in order to reach the level of detail required to gain a true understanding of the graduate leaver's experience.

The nature of the department is another important variable influencing degree progress. Girves & Wemmerus used Biglan's (1973) classification of departments into hard/soft science, applied/basic research and life/nonlife as an indicator of the nature of the department. Biglan discovered that the norms and expectations of faculty as well as the attitudes of faculty and the activities they engage in and value differ significantly in each of these academic clusters. These differences affect the student's experience. Girves & Wemmerus (1988) conclude:

> It is not clear which aspects of the department influence degree progress; yet, it is certain that a student's commitment to earning a degree in a particular discipline is continually modified by his or her experiences in that department. What the faculty do to stimulate the student's interest and to strengthen the student's commitment may ultimately determine the level of degree progress achieved by students in that department. (p. 186)

As has been pointed out in the literature (Cude, 1987) and in chapter IV of this study, attrition rates vary dramatically from one discipline or department to another. While Biglan's classification is useful it does not give a

full picture as it does not account for the differences
between departments within the same academic cluster. For
example, at Simon Fraser University the departments of
psychology and criminology, both social sciences, show
vastly differing attrition rates. Clearly the nature of
the department influences the experience of the student and
needs to be explored further.

Distance education. Studying distance education
models of attrition may be useful in understanding master's
attrition since most distance education learners like
master's learners may be part-time students, are older than
24, and have family and job responsibilities that compete
for their time and energy.

Woodley and Parlet's (1983) "push-pull" model
foreshadows some of the explanations that may be useful in
understanding the experience of the master's leaver. In
their model "push" factors such as wanting the degree to
get a promotion, high interest in the field, desire to
finish something started, supportive family and receipt of
a scholarship encourage continuation. "Pull" factors such
as wanting more time with family, problems with the
supervisor, unsatisfying courses and illness lead to
withdrawal. They suggest that each factor has a different
strength and that leaving will occur when the "pull"
factors outweigh the "push" factors. Some students are
vulnerable from the beginning with "push" factors just

outweighing the "pull" factors. In other cases a dramatic "pull" factor such as a crisis at home or at work will cause withdrawal even when there are strong "push" factors.

This model serves to supplement Girves & Wemmerus's (1988) model by broadening the perspective on the graduate experience and illuminating the complex interrelationships involved in the graduate student's motives for leaving. I anticipate this complex interrelationship of "pulls" and "pushes" will become apparent in the accounts given by the leavers who were interviewed in the course of this study.

Thesis Component

There is considerable evidence that the thesis requirement presents an insurmountable barrier for a significant proportion of doctoral students.

> They are so numerous and so visible that they
> have been given a "degree" of their own. They
> are the ABD's - All But Dissertation. (Berelson,
> 1960, p.171)

It is reasonable to expect that master's students face similar problems with their theses. What are the stressors, hazards, pains and dilemmas that students face as they tackle the demanding task of completing a thesis or project?

Sternberg's (1981) book "How to Complete and Survive a Doctoral Dissertation" focuses on the aloneness of writing the thesis coupled with the unpreparedness of the typical student and the "lukewarm" cooperation of the faculty. Sternberg states that it is normal and predictable for

students writing their thesis to experience such symptoms as anxiety and hysteria, depression or paranoia. He explains that those immersed in a thesis will often report that they feel "on the verge of a nervous breakdown", or that they are "going crazy." He maintains that some may believe this to be an exaggeration but "those in the soup know differently" (p.158).

When asked to word-associate to their dissertation, Sternberg's Ph.D. students and clients typically responded with words like:

> fear, agony, torture, guilt, no end in sight,
> indefinitely postponed gratification, "ruining my
> life", "I'm drowning in it", anxiety, boredom, hate,
> despair, depression, humiliation, powerlessness
> (Sternberg, 1981, p.13)."

He explains that it is not only students who have special problems with their thesis that feel this way but completers feel the same way also. In other words, the experience of writing a thesis is a painful one.

Barzum (1968) echoes Sternberg's perspective that the thesis is an ordeal when he states that the thesis "is often beyond the endurance of many able students, not intellectually, but financially, socially and emotionally" (p. 64). Vartuli (1982), in her book "The Ph.D. Experience: A Woman's Point of View" also concurs with Sternberg's view that the thesis writing experience is a tribulation:

> One becomes egocentric and loses perspective
> on life. One almost goes through a personality
> change... The very confident student can find

        herself thinking she does not know anything.
        Some students have to convince themselves they
        have come too far to quit. (pp.10-11, 42)

I anticipate that the nature of the stresses of thesis

writing as described by these authors are not unlike those

of the master's leavers in this study.

        Rennie and Brewer (1987) studied the experience of

coping with a thesis at the master's and doctoral level.

Using the grounded theory method of qualitative analysis,

they developed the theory that thesis blocking is linked to

the theme of control - the student's feeling of mastery

over the thesis. Control includes the following

properties:

(1) **DEPENDENCE-INDEPENDENCE** Nonblockers (students who

experience relatively little difficulty in completing their

thesis) prefer to work independently but know when to seek

help. Blockers get stuck in feelings of dependency and

have difficulty constructively acting on that need.

Alternatively, blockers feel they should do the thesis on

their own, forgoing the support and advice nonblockers seek

at critical times.

(2) **STRUCTURING THE TASK**

a) *PROJECT MEANINGFULNESS* Nonblockers tend to have a

positive attitude toward the research process viewing the

thesis as part of their career development. This fosters

an attitude of pragmatism making it possible to limit their

thesis goals. Blockers tend to be more idealistic and

inclined to perceive a large gap between meaningful and

feasible research and thus trivialize the latter. Some try to do projects that are unmanageable; others become frustrated when they see that their project makes only a minor contribution to their field of study.

(b) *POLITICAL EXPERTISE* Nonblockers are able to choose a committee they can work with and are able to effectively manage their relationship with committee members. They are aware of the issues and actively play the political game to their advantage. Blockers, on the other hand, are unwilling or unable to cope with the politics involved.

(c) *TIME MANAGEMENT* Nonblockers keep the thesis as a major focus of attention. They organize their time by developing subgoals and adhering to self-imposed deadlines. They want to finish the degree as quickly as possible. Blockers feel no such urgency in completing their degree. They know how to structure the task but do not act on that knowledge. They resent the task and find it a struggle to keep going. Some give up.

While the points that Rennie and Brewer (1987) make are useful, if taken at face value they leave the impression that the students are somehow lacking and at fault if they cannot "gain control over the thesis process." They fail to address the impact of faculty and departmental influences on the student's motivations and ability to structure the task and to move from dependence to independence. For example, in Jacks' et. al. (1983) interviews with 25 doctoral students who did not complete

their dissertations, the leavers cite their poor working relationship with their advisors and/or committee among the main reasons for noncompletion. In some cases leavers lost their advisors due to reasons such as death or transfer while others described their advisors as inaccessible, incompetent or lacking an interest in their research. Still others had committees that did not cooperate well. Financial problems also plagued these leavers, (many of whom were married) who found departmental financial support inadequate. Thus, a more fruitful understanding of thesis blocking must take into account the dynamic interactive influences of the graduate environment on the student.

Rudd (1985) conducted a large qualitative study in which he interviewed 56 master's and doctoral students who withdrew voluntarily from their studies, 7 who were required to withdraw, and 43 who had spent an inordinately long time over their studies. His sample consisted of British students from 13 universities and colleges in England. His assessment of their experiences and why students left their studies is partly summarized below:

> Most of the problems and difficulties that
> postgraduate students meet occur in a general
> way across all subjects and fields of study,
> though in detail they differ not merely from
> one subject to another but between different
> research topics within a subject... it is not
> always relevant whether the student was working
> for a master's degree or a doctorate. There is
> no sharp dividing line between the two - both
> generally include elements of courses and
> research. The failures of the master's students
> were mainly centered on their research projects,
> and the problems they met in their research
> were not greatly different from those met by

the doctoral students, even though the scale
was different. (p. 20-21)

Rudd states that the causes of graduate leaving are
complex. Just as road accidents rarely have a single
cause, student leaving is multicausal. Yet, he argues that
these causes are usually connected with research (a failure
to complete the thesis necessary for the degree).

Rudd suggests 3 main causes for noncompletion. First,
the student may lack the competence or aptitude needed for
research as evidenced in his/her lack of knowledge of
research methods and techniques and resultant inability to
write reasonably rapidly. Second, leavers lack the inner
drive and persistent enthusiasm necessary for completion.
They allow other things to take precedence over the thesis
which results in the failure to surmount the various
hurdles to completion. Personal problems such as injuries,
illness (mental or physical), marital and family as well as
employment make completion more difficult. In particular,
starting a family (for women) or getting a new job (for
men) often puts an end to progress. Third, poor
supervision especially in the early stages decreases the
likelihood of the student completing. The number one
complaint of students is that the supervisor is not
interested in their work and provides too little useful
help and constructive criticism.

As Zuber-Skerritt (1987) points out, thesis research
and writing is a completely new task for most master's
students. Many have never seen a proposal. Little

attention, however, is given to the development of the
formal skills necessary to design and direct research and
to apply research findings. Sternberg (1981) contends that
even at the doctoral level students are often illiterate in
research design and analysis due to poorly designed and
narrowly defined courses which cannot readily be applied to
the student's research.

Zuber-Skerritt & Knight (1985,1986) and Zuber-Skerritt
(1987) focus on the ill-preparedness of master's students
to produce a thesis. They suggest that the single
supervisor model be improved and supplemented by the use of
workshops in which both supervisors and students
participate. Through discussion, students in these
workshops are given practical guidance and psychological
support for two problem phases of thesis writing: problem
definition and writing the first draft. Evaluations of
such workshops at Griffith University (Australia) reveal
that students not only benefit by learning research and
writing skills, but are helped to overcome social and
intellectual "isolation" or "loneliness" found to be
associated with a lack of confidence and motivation and
with a higher attrition rate (Welsh, 1979). In addition,
other difficulties identified by SERC (1983) which
contribute to delayed completion times are mitigated.
These include the problem of students making a slow start,
being distracted from the main focus of the research,
inadequate collection of data due to poor planning, and

student perfectionism accompanied by the tendency to postpone the writing process. Group support and interaction allow students to see that others face exactly the same difficulties and that there are strategies and techniques which can overcome them. As a result student morale, confidence and productivity is boosted thus lowering attrition rates (Zuber-Skerrett, 1987).

In the above analyses of Rudd and Zuber-Skerritt, we see two opposing philosophical positions. Rudd appears to blame the student for being "dilatory" and lacking talent and aptitude for research thus perpetuating the status quo and exonerating the establishment. On the other hand, Zuber-Skerritt places the blame on the system essentially stating that the status quo is not good enough. Then he proposes an alternative to the present system and presents evidence showing the advantages of the alternative.

The Department

We must be cautious about blaming students for noncompletion. Early research into high school attrition focused on a "blame the victim" approach, where those who left the school system were considered the problem rather than the institution they attended. This early research has long since been discredited. When one in twenty master's students are noncompleters, it may be their problem. When one in three leave their program, then we

need to look further. What accounts for this high rate of
noncompletion?

Katz & Hartnett (1976) in their comprehensive study of
American Ph.D. students propose the following root problems
in graduate schools: (1) Prospective students are given
too little information to make a reasonable judgement about
the extent to which they will fit into the department under
consideration.

> Many extremely able and potentially productive
> scholars do not complete their graduate training
> because of dissatisfaction with their graduate
> experience. In many of these instances, the
> dissatisfaction has to do with circumstances that
> existed in the department before the student
> enrolled but were not known to the student. (p. 83-
> 84)

For example, a student may find it impossible to pursue
their research interests which conflict philosophically
with the faculty of the department. (2) Graduate education
has become increasingly impersonal. Students expect to
become part of a dynamic community of scholars but instead
find themselves in relative social and intellectual
isolation as they pursue a narrow specialty that few can
share with them. As well, students expect intellectual
stimulation through sharing of ideas and working with their
colleagues in the program. Instead they often find a
competitive atmosphere in which there is little opportunity
for cooperation. In addition, students hope to work with
professors who will direct and reflect on their work. Yet
they find access to professors limited and treatment often
less than respectful from their point of view. Their

dubious status as graduate students creates a sense of

helplessness driving them to "infantilized patterns of

behavior and feelings" (p.5). (3) Students want their

learning to be meaningful - connected to their interests

and motivations. Instead, they complain that courses often

reflect the interests and intellectual preferences of their

professors. What is more, students often find themselves

working on thesis projects which do not reflect their

curiosity and motivations. (4) Finally, students expect to

enjoy the intellectual challenges of graduate study and at

the same time to nurture and expand their social network.

Instead, they find themselves overworked with little time

for their personal lives:

> Their lives [are] crammed, their moods serious
> if not grim, and their energies beset by
> relentless requirements and even busywork, all
> of which make graduate school at times more
> resemble military drill than the exercise of
> man's most intellectual and imaginative
> capacities. (p.5)

Each of the problems cited above shows a discrepancy

between the expectations of the students and the realities

they encounter. Holding expectations can lead to feelings

of anger, hurt and disappointment when those expectations

are not met. Some students may handle the disconfirmation

of what they expect and the resulting dissatisfaction by

deciding to withdraw.

Some researchers (Ibrahim, McEven & Pitblado, 1980;

Rudd, 1985;) speculate that rising noncompletion rates may

be connected to rising standards of performance. The first

Ph.D. dissertation which came out of Yale University in 1861 was six pages in length. As of 1970, 53 percent of English Ph.D. dissertations were 151 to 300 pages in length, 32 percent were 301 to 500 pages long, and 6 percent were over 500 pages long (Heiss, 1970). The standard length of the thesis and the increase in the length of time a student is expected to take to complete a degree reflects this rise in performance expectations.

Contributing to this increase in the standard length of the thesis is the mushrooming expansion of knowledge. This poses academic problems which can only be resolved by limiting the range and scope of research projects. It may be that students do not receive adequate guidance in choosing appropriate thesis topics nor in what the department expects of them. Perhaps the perceptions of supervisors and examiners of a rising required level of achievement makes it more difficult for students to complete their degrees. Perhaps, too, certain departments overestimate what students can do.

Ibrahim et al., (1980) go as far as to suggest that excessive standards are consciously or unconsciously imposed for ulterior motives: Graduate students are a source of cheap teaching labour; they are an important source of publications for the supervisor; and they are an important source of funding to the university. In other words, they are too useful to be allowed to finish too

quickly. Whatever the reasons for the increased standard

of performance, Zuber-Skerritt & Knight (1986) state:

> Our experience suggests that postgraduate
> students and supervisors alike perceive
> dissertation writing as an awesome, and
> in some cases insuperable task; indeed,
> it can become such a daunting prospect
> that some students are effectively
> immobilized, lose all self-confidence,
> and either fail to submit, or do so
> well after the due submission date. (p. 91)

Certain authors (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988) contend that

financial support in the form of teaching and research

assistantships is beneficial to degree progress. Are

teaching assistantships and research assistantships

helpful? While in some instances research assistantships

can be helpful to the student (e.g. if the project teaches

the student research skills or if the study is in a similar

area to the student's), this is generally not the case.

Teaching assistantships are even further removed from a

student's research focus and make great demands upon his or

her time. Therefore, teaching and research assistantships

may serve to prolong degree completion time and may in some

cases be fatal to degree completion (Healey et al., 1978).

Whereas it is generally believed that outside work is

a distraction from scholarly study, in certain cases

outside work may be directly related to the research of the

student and facilitate completion. In many cases outside

work is also higher paying and hours tend to be more

regular. Of course the ideal situation would be funding

exclusively in the form of grants and scholarships freeing

students to concentrate on their course work and research. It is expected that this study will shed more light on the relationship between financing and degree completion.

The research on academic support groups indicates that very little is done to provide support to incoming students. For example, de Rosenroll et al., (1987) sent out a questionnaire to 24 Canadian Universities to ascertain whether their counselling psychology/school psychology departments offered any support to entering master's students. In total, 8 responses were received, 3 of which were affirmative. The literature also indicates that while students express a need for support when support groups are offered they are not well attended. For example, Williams et al., (1984) discovered that fully half of the members of a support group offered for mature master's students discontinued attendance due to time constraints. Perhaps if the support group dealt more directly with the task at hand then students would perceive it to be worth their time to attend. Such focused support groups are discussed by Sternberg (1981) who recommends small intensive workshops in which students draft a detailed proposal as well as work-in-progress peer support groups offered as part of the university program. These strategies may work against the confusion, isolation and lack of confidence so often experienced by the student and moves them toward their goal.

<u>Student/Advisor Relationship</u>

The relationship of students to their advisor and committee members is mentioned by several researchers as critical to graduate student progress (Berelson, 1960; Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Rudd, 1985; Welsh, 1979).

> Graduate student relations with members of the faculty is regarded by most graduate students as the single most important aspect of the quality of their graduate experience; unfortunately, many also report that it is the single most disappointing aspect of their graduate experience... (Katz & Hartnett, p. 261-262)

Perhaps attribution theory can help us to understand the impact of the student/advisor relationship on the master's student's decision to leave. According to attribution theory (Weiner, 1979) learners seek to understand why events occur. For example, a master's student might ask, "Why is it so difficult for me to write?" or "Why doesn't my supervisor seem interested in my work?" The answers to these questions are causal attributions. According to Weiner (1979), individuals' causal prescription of why events occur may be of major importance in understanding achievement-related behavior. Students' beliefs are presumed to determine subsequent expectations for future performance and the willingness to exert effort and to persist in the face of difficulty or failure.

The locus of causality is thought to influence self-esteem and affect in general. Learners who attribute their failure to internal, stable causes such as ability

and personality do not believe there is a possibility of
succeeding in the future and experience affects such as
shame, guilt and helplessness.

How do learners decide what causes are responsible for
their success or failure? One source of information on
which learners base their attributions comes from
professors' verbal and nonverbal behaviors toward them.
For example, Saks and Krupat (1988) cite an undergraduate
study in which a group of freshmen who were experiencing
academic problems were told that most students' grades
improve as they adapt to university life. In addition,
they were told by students in their second and third year
that they found things easier as they went on. The impact
of this information was dramatic. Compared to the control
group who received no such information, the changed-
attribution group improved greatly in test scores and
grades. Over the next year 25% of the control group
withdrew compared to only 5% of the experimental group.

As far as I am aware, attribution theory has not been
applied to the study of master's student attrition though
Katz & Hartnett (1976) allude to the process when they
state:

> It probably cannot be overstated how insecure and
> vulnerable many graduate students are; how much
> they overreact to what they take to be positive
> and negative signals from their professors; and
> how insensitive many professors are to their
> impact upon the student. Professors of course
> once experienced all these emotions themselves,
> but a protective amnesia has long since erased
> them from their conscious memory. (p. 267)

Bennett and Knibbs (1986) examine the many different roles of the supervisor. They suggest at least ten possible supervisory roles in four key groups: (a) process roles - bureaucrat, initiator; (b) academic roles - expert, mentor, innovator; (c) interpersonal roles - friendly helper, motivator; and (d) validation roles - stern critic, evaluator, judge. This model aids our understanding of the many tasks and problems that supervisors and students face at different stages in the research process. As Bennett and Knibbs suggest, it is the exceptional supervisor who can fulfill all or even some of these roles. The experience, personality and preference of supervisors may lead them to take on only the most obvious roles of the bureaucrat and the critic. These roles, though important, may not necessarily meet students' needs and expectations. What is essential is that both students and supervisor discuss their expectations and contributions (Elliott, 1983).

Despite the multiplexity of demands and roles of the supervisory task, there is no training and little guidance for supervisors (Allen, 1980). In addition, many supervisors are overworked and have numerous duties other than supervision competing for their time. Supervision rates low as a career-promoting activity. Graduate professors are promoted and given tenure on the basis of what they publish themselves not for supervising the

writings of students. Thus, motivation for engaging in supervision is often low (Sternberg, 1981).

Under these circumstances it comes as no surprise that many students feel that the supervision they receive does not meet their expectations. If a student attributes the quality of supervision they receive to systemic causes rather than to their intellectual or personality traits, then, according to attribution theory, they are more likely to successfully adapt to the supervision they are receiving and to find ways of working around the more problematic aspects. Or will they? The politics involved in changing supervisors and the relatively powerless and dependent position of the student in the academic milieu may stifle even those who understand that their needs are not being met in the supervisory relationship.

Bargar & Mayo-Chamberlain (1983) investigate current practices of the advisor/advisee relationship from a developmental perspective. They not only outline what they see as the supervisor's role in fostering a positive environment for doctoral students as they progress through the various stages of the program, but they also describe the student's responsibilities. They challenge students to overcome the passive stance characteristic of the student role:

> Many influences in education as it is generally
> practiced today tend to cast the student in a
> receptive role. Information transfer does
> dominate educational processes, and the most
> active part a student is envisioned as playing
> may consist only of reaching out to "take hold"

> of the subject matter. Thus, it is not
> remarkable that students who have continued as
> far as graduate education may also see
> themselves as the recipients of the effects of
> their educational environment rather than as
> proactive shapers of it. (p. 419)

Thus, students may not take responsibility for their own

growth and advancement so necessary for success in their

program. For example, Barger and Mayo-Chamberlain (1983)

suggest that students have a responsibility for developing

community among their committee members.

> The extent of the committee members' willingness
> to act as friendly guides can only be tested by
> an advisee who is willing to initiate interaction...
> Most [committee members] only get involved to the
> extent to which they are invited. The advisee is
> the one getting the education, and the reading
> committee is one of the principal arenas in which
> advisees themselves determine the quality of their
> experience. (p. 426)

The student's level of proactivity can profoundly influence

the quality of the supervision received. Thus it would

seem that the ways in which leavers view and cope with

authority figures may influence their decision to withdraw.

At the same time it must be asked how it is that

students should suddenly be able to change from a

passive/recipient role at this stage of their education

unless they are given adequate information about their

rights and responsibilities in the supervisory

relationship, information that is not generally given.

Thus a common complaint is that students do not know what

to expect or what is expected of them. The social system

in which they find themselves is confusing and difficult to

navigate. What exactly are the rules, requirements,

expectations and standards? Sharzan (1973) points out that students often lack knowledge of the process in which they find themselves. They do not understand what it consists of or the various phases through which they are moving. They also have problems in controlling how the various passages occur. This lack of understanding leads to assumptions and actions that are inappropriate for a particular stage of the passage. It is expected that a student's political sophistication and adjustment to the culture of graduate education plays an important role in the decision to leave.

The Student

The OECD report (1987) focuses on the "changing shape" of graduate education. There are changes in student demographic trends: the graduate student population is becoming older and there is an increase in part-time study.

There is a clear association between part-time study and noncompletion at the post-graduate level (OECD, 1987). For this reason many educators in Sweden have taken the view that part-time study should be considerably restricted. Women in the United States, Great Britain and Australia are more likely to be part-time students and thus are more likely to be noncompleters. In addition, studies in the United States and Sweden indicate that women with children and family responsibilities have considerable difficulty in managing the demands of these roles with that

of student. Clearly, part-time female students are at a tremendous disadvantage in our present system of graduate studies (Berg & Ferber, 1983; Dagg, 1989; Klodawsky, 1989; Haley, 1989).

Solomon & Gordon (1981) in their book "The Characteristics and Needs of Adults in Postsecondary Education" address an important point. Adult learners differ from traditional students in their life circumstances and what they wish to achieve from their educational experiences. If "the most powerful predictor of persistence in adult education is satisfaction with the learning activity in terms of its 'helpfulness' in meeting one's objectives" (Anderson and Darkenwald, 1979, pp. 4-5 as quoted by Solmon & Gordon, p.73), then the university needs to have an understanding of the students it serves in order to invest the learning experience with meaning and purpose. For if the purposes of the students and the purposes of the institution are at odds then the students may express their dissatisfaction by leaving.

Who are the students who enter graduate studies? How can we understand their behaviors? What are their motives, needs and goals? What is important to them?

One way to understand the students who choose to enter master's programs is with the help of adult development theory. Kuh and Thomas (1983) empirically determined that adult development theory (Gould, 1978; Levinson et al., 1978; Sheehy, 1974) can be used to describe the

developmental processes of graduate students. They
conducted interviews with 40 master's and doctoral
students. The 20 female and male graduate students were
distributed equally into two age groups (20-28 years and
33-40 years). They discovered that the developmental themes
described in the literature are applicable to graduate
students and that the behavioral patterns of the younger
students are more descriptive of the older students.

Kuh & Thomas (1983) labelled the developmental period
characteristic of the ages of 33 to 40 "The Differentiated,
Responsible Adult" (p.13). This period includes such tasks
as assuming greater responsibility in work roles, assuming
ownership of one's behavior (self-directed and purposeful
behavior), a deepened understanding and evaluation of
commitments made in earlier periods, an awareness and
expression of a broader range of emotions and a conflict
between a desire for more autonomy and societal value
placed on one's vocational role.

In Kuh and Thomas's study four themes emerged from the
content analysis of the interviews: (1) "redefinition of
self" - the importance of relationships to a healthy
identity; (2) "purposeful independence" - younger students
tend to be less autonomous and purposeful while older
students are more self-directed; (3) "exploration versus
maintenance of a stable life pattern" - younger students
prefer a less defined lifestyle than older students; and

(4) "the dream" - how graduate study might contribute to a desired life pattern.

The tasks characteristic of students aged 33-40 appear to clash with the graduate school milieu. For example, the need for autonomy and self-direction conflict with the inherent dependency and powerlessness students feel in graduate school. In addition, the university environment does not acknowledge the importance of students' careers and families and assumes that students want and are able to maintain a continuous single focus on their studies. One may well ask why post-secondary education is structured in such a way that a single focus is expected and often necessary for successful completion of a program. Finally, students in this developmental stage are conscious of how they are spending their time and resources as they focus on their dreams and goals. They expect that their time is going to be well used and their experience will have meaning and purpose.

Conclusion

In researching this topic, I was surprised to find so little attention given to graduate students and their experience.

> The training of the mind is a subtle and complex affair, and one would expect a large body of research and literature to exist in which the intellective and nonintellective factors favoring the development of the mind are explored. Hardly anything of the sort exists... The passage of students through their training has rarely been made subject of systematic inquiry... (Katz & Hartnett, 1976, p. 3)

What inquiry has been done can be criticized on several points. Either it is too static and general such as the Girves & Wemmerus' (1988) model which accounts for only 29% of the variance in student leaving or it appears to fault the student neglecting to describe adequately the dynamic process of the evolution of the student from a participant to a leaver (Rennie & Brewer, 1987; Rudd, 1986). How, over a period of time, does a keenly motivated student become a disillusioned leaver? What does it mean to be a leaver? This present inquiry hopes to shed light on these questions by focusing on the student's personal experience.

This is not to say that these models are of no use. They do point toward fruitful areas of inquiry and can form the foundation for that inquiry. For example Girves & Wemmerus highlight the importance of the student - faculty relationship as an integral part of the graduate student experience. This focus serves as a spring board for a more detailed analysis of the student - supervisor relationship and its impact on both thesis progress, and the final decision to leave.

Another conceptualization of what leads to graduate leaving is the lack of preparedness of students to undertake the thesis/project requirement as described by Zuber-Skerrit & Knight (1986) and Sternberg (1981). This important if seldom discussed hypothesis in the literature about the problems graduate students face focuses on the department and its responsibility to educate its students.

Finally, a theme in the research reviewed which serves as a spring board for further inquiry is adult development theory (Kuh & Thomas, 1983). Further inquiry based on these understandings may lead to a more detailed knowledge of the dynamics involved in the clash between student needs and expectations with what they actually find in their graduate program (Katz & Hartnett, 1976) as well as the impact of this clash of expectations on the decision to leave.

In sum this literature review contains several foreshadowed explanations of what researchers believe to be the keys to understanding noncompletion: (1) the student/supervisor relationship. Related to this, (2) the task of writing the thesis itself - excessive standards of performance, students' lack of research skills and inadequate departmental support given to students to master this task, and (3) student dissatisfaction with the academic milieu - a poor fit for mature students whose needs and expectations are not met.

I anticipate that several influences will be involved in a student's decision to leave. The true explanation will be complex. By remaining open to what may enter into the student's decision to leave, I hope to see the true nature and significance of master's student leaving.

Chapter III

Method

This study involved a two stage process. In the first stage I took a system-wide statistical look at master's student leaving at Simon Fraser University which led to considerations of general trends, patterns and possible explanations. To reach a more complete understanding, however, of the leaving process a more detailed micro-analysis, via a questionnaire and interview, was used to complement this approach.

The first stage of this study was performed as follows: Using a data set acquired from Dr. Bruce Clayman's office, a subset of this data set which consisted of all master's students who terminated over a five year period (1985-1990) was extracted. From this data set preliminary summary statistics were generated via the GRADSTAT program, a graduate statistics program. The development of this program was funded by the Dean of Graduate Studies to provide the software necessary for this study. This program continues to be used by the Office of the Dean of Graduate Studies for statistical analysis.

Further statistical analysis using the SYSTAT program was performed on the data set. The statistical analysis consisted of descriptive statistics, three-way analysis of variance, and Chi Square. Due to the limitations of the SYSTAT program, the

post hoc tests were performed using the SAS program. The three-way analysis of variance and Chi Square were performed to determine if there were any statistically significant relationships. This was followed up by post hoc tests to determine which factors contributed to the statistical significance and what weight these factors played, if any.

The second stage of this study was conceptualized as the hypothesis generating stage in which the goal was to explore the perceptions and experiences of master's student leavers. The qualitative focus was ideally suited to this purpose, as the emphasis was on attempting to understand the complexity and variation endemic to the leaving process from the point of view of the leavers themselves. The various methods of data collection and analysis, including the use of the extended focused interview were selected for their suitability to build a generative picture of the phenomena under investigation and thus to retain and highlight the qualitative nature of the leaving process.

Participants

Participants in this study were recruited from a sample of Simon Fraser University master's students who left their programs in the summer and fall semesters of 1990 and spring semester of 1991. A total of 69 leavers were sent a covering letter explaining the study and a questionnaire in which they were asked to participate in an interview (see Appendix B).

I attempted to make follow-up telephone contact with all leavers who had not responded to the questionnaire or whose questionnaires were returned because they had moved. A total of 34 leavers could not be reached. One leaver had died.

Eleven questionnaires were completed and returned by mail. An additional 5 questionnaires were completed over the telephone and 6 more were completed in person during interviews bringing the total number of completed questionnaires to 22. Among the questionnaires returned by mail 6 respondents agreed to participate in an interview. Of these, one had moved to the United States and another to a remote area of B.C.

Through telephone contact, I encouraged an additional 8 leavers to participate in the interview. The remaining 4 were selected from the 6 volunteers on the basis of availability for an in-person interview. Thus, a total of 12 leavers, 6 male and 6 female, participated in the interview portion of this study. Of this sample of convenience, 6 leavers came from high attrition departments (40% and over), 4 came from average attrition departments (29% - 34%) and 2 came from low attrition departments (less than 25%). Participants came from 7 different departments.

In the follow-up telephone contacts, it became clear just how difficult it was for individuals to discuss their experience. One leaver refused to come to the telephone relaying through his wife that he would send in his questionnaire which he did not do. Three women were very

angry. One of these women consented to an interview after a
forty-five minute conversation in which we developed rapport.
Two others quickly cut me off refusing to discuss their
experience further. Still others explained how extremely busy
their schedules were, so busy that they could not take time to
fill out the questionnaire much less participate in an
interview. There were some who apologized for not responding
and agreed to answer the questionnaire over the telephone
while I took down their responses. A small minority
congratulated me on my topic and gladly consented to discuss
their graduate experience. In general, men seemed more
willing to discuss their experience than women. Thus, it
appears that for some leavers the process of joining the study
was shaming; they felt exposed. For others, the covering
letter helped them combat shame by informing them they were
not alone and recognizing something other than themselves, the
contextual factors, as part of their experience thus assisting
them to break the illusion of personal inadequacy.

Instruments

The questionnaire was developed with insights from Tucker
(1964) and was designed to give leavers an opportunity to
describe their reasons for withdrawing from their programs.
In addition, demographic information was solicited to put
responses into context. A main purpose of the questionnaire
was to identify willingness to participate in an interview.

As is true of mailed questionnaires in general, the response rate was low. The high non-response rate reduced the reliability of the questionnaire making it impossible to produce a statistically valid content analysis. As a result this portion of the study was abandoned. While this was not my main goal, it was disappointing not to have access to a broader overview of leavers' experiences which could clarify, verify or expand upon the stories of the interviewees. This did not detract from my main purpose, however, which was to obtain a rich description of leavers' experiences through the focused interviews.

The prime means of investigation used was the "focused interview". The content of the interview guide was based on the literature review, consultation with members of my committee and fellow graduate students as well as my personal knowledge and experience as a master's student and counsellor. The interview guide was pilot tested with two female master's leavers who were recruited through an acquaintance to determine difficulties with the sequence and meaning of questions and length of the interview. Minor changes were made to the final interview guide which can be found in Appendix C.

The "focused interview" was chosen because of its potential for illuminating the meanings and effects of master's student leavers' experiences in graduate school. While the interview guide sets forth the major areas of inquiry, the criterion of nondirection through unstructured

questions allows participants to define their experience fully and specifically. Through the use of probing, participants are invited to describe their feelings and responses in minute detail thus drawing out pertinent information.

Due to the personal and sensitive nature of this study, most leavers found it painful and difficult to revisit their graduate school experience. For example, one leaver stated with a nervous laugh, "Whatever you do, don't call your study 'The Winners and the Losers'." Through empathy, support and appropriate self-disclosure leavers were encouraged to explore and share their perspectives and understandings. For most leavers, the interview process brought up many emotions including anger, frustration, disappointment, feelings of self-doubt, sadness and loss. Part of what I observed was a process of grieving. In recognizing their loss, I helped them get in touch with that loss. I assisted them with was initiating the process of grieving. I was giving them permission.

Procedure

Participants were recruited as outlined above. Through telephone contact, an appointment was made for the interview at a time and place convenient for the participant. All interviews were conducted by myself and took place in the participants' homes or places of work or in restaurants and lounges.

Participants were encouraged to tell their stories through the use of open ended questions in a "focused interview" (see Appendix C). The interview questions were memorized and were presented in a sequence that followed the natural flow of the conversation. This meant that interviews varied somewhat according to each individual. In most interviews not all interview questions needed to be asked as the content naturally came up in the course of the conversations. For example, in discussing their perceptions of the department, leavers often brought up their relationship with their supervisor and difficulties with their thesis. In addition, environmental press issues were often discussed in the course of the rest of the interview.

Interviews were of approximately two hours duration and were taped using a micro-tape recorder. The audio tapes were transcribed onto an IBM compatible computer. The transcripts contained the participants' responses under the major headings of the inquiry. Where necessary, the interviewer's probes or questions were included for purposes of clarity. In total there were 460 pages of transcribed material.

<u>Analysis</u>

In the first phase of data analysis narrative profiles containing anecdotes from the leavers were developed to illustrate each leaver's experience and perceptions leading to withdrawal. In this way a large amount of data was succinctly portrayed. Following the narratives a thematic analysis

outlining a single common theme and its attributes as identified in the following two phases of analysis was presented.

To analyze the interviews I used the principles of the grounded theory method developed by Glaser (1978). Using split-screen windows on my word processor I viewed the transcript in one window while in the other window I entered "units of analysis" (complete thoughts) under various descriptive categories. For example, in one window entitled "course work" I placed each leaver's impressions of his/her course work as follows:

> Sarah: p. 50 - It just didn't meet my needs. It really didn't match what I... except I would have enjoyed learning what they were teaching, but at my own pace. Now, if I'm going to learn something that's like totally out of left field let me do it at an adult learner's pace.

In another window entitled "relationship with colleagues" I placed each leaver's thinking on that subject:

> Andre: p. 29 - The graduate students there I will say were fantastic. But it was an association born out of desperation because everybody... I was very comfortable cause I talked to them about this straight open and the statement that they made was that they've all gone through the same thing. And so we sat around and griped together and we cried on each other....

Each analytic unit was placed in one or more categories; new categories were created to accommodate any given units that could not be appropriately placed. I used these windows to systematically compare and contrast themes within and across interviews and to look for significance in the themes. My

goal was to find and follow thematic threads that were woven through the fabric of the leavers' experience.

This phase of the analysis identified some 18 descriptive categories. In studying and evaluating these categories an underlying theme in the experience of the leavers was recognized and identified as the core category that subsumed the other categories which then became attributes of the core category. In addition sub-categories were identified which fell under general categories. For example, financial stress, time constraints, and role conflicts fell under the general category of "physical support".

In the next phase of analysis patterns of experience were observed between leavers and across time of leaving (i.e. early leaving versus late leaving). In addition, gender differences were noted. Each leaver was then studied in light of the identified core category and its attributes in order to determine if the assumptions fit the facts of the individual story.

The aim of data analysis was to develop an in-depth, reliable description of leavers' experience of withdrawing from master's programs. Analyzing the thematic content was time consuming, frustrating and difficult. Analysis is necessarily subjective and involves an interpretive aspect which may go beyond what is immediately apparent to the person telling the story. Analysis also involves a succession of decisions about the specificity and detail of information to be included.

I was aware that my experience as a student and my interpretation of that experience would influence my interpretation of others' experiences. Therefore it was of considerable importance that the context of leavers' experience not be lost allowing the reader some room for mental thematic analysis thus recognizing that some information would have a different shade of meaning for another person. Nevertheless, I am confident I have identified the circumstances considered most significant to the leavers themselves.

CHAPTER IV

Statistical Portrait of Master's Student Progress

Our state of ignorance about the outcomes of
education is not bliss.

                              -Alexander Astin

(From an address given at the University
 of Texas on February 4, 1981)

Although Western academics have fretted about the
attrition issue for decades, no definitive
statistics on the subject are available even now,
and the most elementary questions linger unanswered.
In any given graduate program at any given
university, how many students were enrolled since
its inception? Of those, how many received their
degrees? How many others are still active in the
program? And how many have dropped out? In an era
of computerized data processing, it is astounding
that our universities... still cannot furnish such
humble but essential intelligence. (Cude, 1987,
p.132)

Systematic data on noncompletion are scanty. In

Canada there is no institution which conducts sustained

research in higher education. The Economic Council of

Canada (1969) states that the "small amount of research

in education is woefully inadequate" (Sixth Annual

Review, p.167). The OECD report of 1969 concludes that

"research is certainly one of the weakest areas of the

Canadian educational system" (ibid. p.101). More

recently, the OECD report of 1987 entitled

"Post-Graduate Education in the 1980s," contains no

statistics from Canada. No centralized data exists as

to the precise magnitude of graduate attrition in the

Canadian context. Though there are local studies within some universities, there appears to be a void in definitive statistics on the progress of graduate candidates across all institutions.

Purpose of Chapter IV

How serious is the master's attrition problem at Simon Fraser University? What trends need to be taken into account? The purpose of this chapter is to examine the dimensions and the nature of master's student progress at Simon Fraser University during the years 1985-1990.

Simon Fraser University's department of Analytical Studies keeps yearly university-wide statistics. These statistics do not, however, include attrition data. This information, though computerized by the Dean of Graduate Studies and the Graduate Registrar has not been readily usable due to the lack of application programs to analyze this data. Thus, until recently, we have not known on a university-wide scale how long it takes an average master's student to complete a degree, nor do we have this information for any particular department. We have not known how many students leave a program without completing it. We have not known if there are differential success rates or time to completion rates when male and female students are compared. In addition, we have not known the average age or CGPA of completers and leavers and the distributions of these characteristics.

Data Set

The data set used in this analysis comes from Dr. Bruce Clayman's office and consists of the 1,792 master's students who left Simon Fraser University programs during the years 1985(3)-1990(3). Note that master's students who transfer after initial entry are counted as completing their program. The data set has some missing cases, and has some cases with one or more variables having no data. The problematic cases are so few in relation to the size of the data set, however, that the following patterns and conclusions can be made with reasonable accuracy. The dataset was analyzed using Systat with the following statistical tests being performed: descriptive statistics, 3-way analysis of variance and Chi Square.

Demographics of SFU Master's Students

Gender. Of the 1,792 students who left Simon Fraser University in the past five years, 40% or 722 were women (see figure 1). This proportion matches Statistics Canada (1987-88) figures. The proportion of women enrolled in master's programs in Canada has increased considerably over the past 10 years; a decade earlier, women comprised 30% of master's enrollees.

Figure 1: Breakdown of SFU Master's Students by Gender

Female 40%

Male 60%
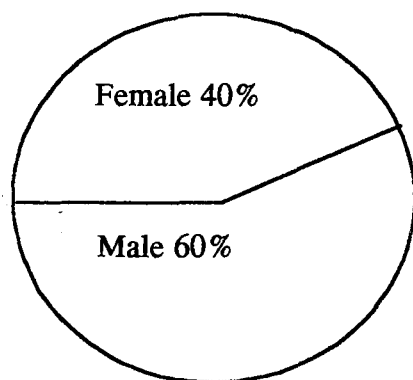
Women at Simon Fraser University are statistically under-represented in the natural and applied sciences where the proportion of female master's students hovers around 28% and 27% respectively; and to a lesser degree the social sciences where female master's students represent around 38% of total enrollment. In contrast, the proportion of female master's students in the humanities and education is about 50% and 56% respectively. (For a detailed departmental count of female and male master's students see Table 2).

Researchers such as Hornig (1987) speculate that lower participation of women in the sciences may partly be due to female socialization and an educational system which discourages women from mathematics. Women may also face disadvantages in employment in scientific fields which affects their aspirations.

Field of Study. The relative percentages of students in each field of study are shown in figure 2. The social

sciences, which also includes the Faculty of Education, make up approximately 60% of the total master's enrollment. It appears that the general trend away from the humanities into the social sciences found at other universities (Statistics Canada, 1987-88; OECD, 1987) is in evidence at Simon Fraser University.

figure 2: Relative Percentages of Master's Students in Each Field of Study 1985-1990
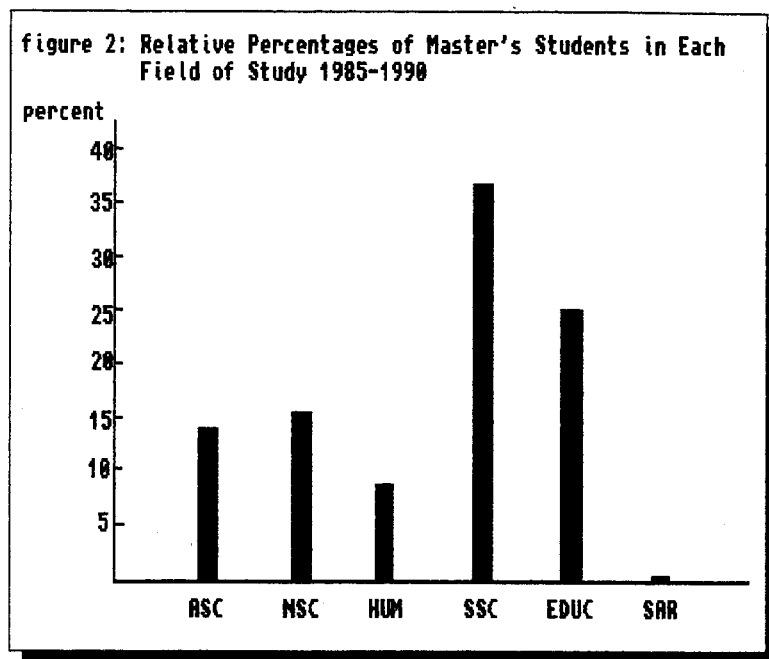
NOTE: SAR stands for Special Arrangement

Age. The age distribution of graduate students in Canada has shifted toward the older end of the scale. In 1987-88, 38% of the men and 41% of the women were over the age of 29 (Statistics Canada, 1987-88). At Simon Fraser University 43% of incoming graduate students are 30 years of age or older. The average age of master's students is approximately 31 years. Women are slightly younger averaging 30.25 years while men average 30.84 years. Students in the natural and applied sciences are the

youngest averaging 27 and 28 years respectively. Whereas students in the humanities and education are considerably older averaging 33 and 35 years respectively (see figure 4).

From Table 1 it can be seen that different fields of study represent different age groups. For example, in education 2.8% of students are under 25 years of age; whereas in the natural sciences, 45.3% are under 25 years of age. It appears that roughly half of the natural science students and one-third of applied sciences students go directly from undergraduate studies to graduate studies.

Table 1: Percentile Age Breakdown of SFU Graduate Students

AGE	PERCENTILES BY FIELD				
	ASC	NSC	HUM	SSC	EDUC
UNDER 25	32.0	45.3	13.4	26.9	2.8
UNDER 30	71.6	80.7	42.7	52.5	24.1
UNDER 35	89.2	93.7	68.0	74.6	53.2
UNDER 40	96.0	98.3	79.4	89.7	77.1
UNDER 45	98.0	99.7	90.7	95.3	91.1
UNDER 50	98.8	99.7	97.4	98.3	97.1
UNDER 90	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Attrition

In the past 5 years, approximately 30% or 532 students did not complete their master's degrees at Simon Fraser University (see figure 3). This figure matches that of

Statistics Canada (1987) which also reports a 30% attrition rate among graduate students. Simon Fraser University's attrition rate is, however, considerably higher than a larger institution such as the University of Toronto which reports a rate of 20% at the master's level (Sheinin, 1987).

Gender. There is no significant difference between male and female attrition rates at Simon Fraser University. Women have a noncompletion rate of approximately 30.5% compared to 29.2% for men. This finding differs from studies in the United States and Sweden (OECD, 1987) which indicate that women have higher noncompletion rates than men.

Overall, women have a slightly lower attrition rate in every field but the social sciences, the largest field of study. However, within certain departments such as political science and sociology, completion rates appear noticeably higher for men. Conversely, in the departments of history and languages women have markedly lower attrition rates (Table 2). In programs where women are under-represented such as business administration and most of the natural sciences, those women who do enter these programs have favorable attainment rates when compared to their male colleagues. While these differences in completion rates cannot be shown to be statistically significant due to small numbers, these trends are interesting and merit further investigation.

TABLE 2

Analysis of Progress of Master's Students at Simon Fraser
University - Numbers of Students Who Have Left Departments,
Percentages of Noncompletion by Gender, and Overall Rate of
Attrition 1985(3)-1990(3)

DEPARTMENT	COUNT FEMALE/MALE		% ATTRTION FEMALE/MALE		% OVERALL
Computing Science	21	73	29	15	18
Engineering Science	2	40	0	73	69
Kinesiology	17	21	18	14	16
Nat'l Resource Management	27	50	26	38	34
APPLIED SCIENCES (ASC)	67	184	23	32	31
Biological Sciences	49	88	16	13	14
Chemistry	12	33	17	27	24
Mathematics & Statistics	16	44	19	27	25
Physics	4	42	0	24	22
NATURAL SCIENCES (NSC)	81	207	16	20	19
English	42	34	43	50	46
History	17	28	47	54	51
Languages & Linguistics	11	10	27	40	33
Philosophy	6	4	100	75	90
HUMANITIES (HUM)	76	76	46	51	49
Archaeology	15	13	40	38	39
Business Administration	56	197	14	15	15
Communications	30	22	30	27	29
Criminology	44	38	41	58	49
Economics	28	64	29	25	26
Geography	14	22	36	32	33
Political Science	10	13	50	38	43
Psychology	30	22	13	23	17
Sociology & Anthropology	10	11	60	27	43
Women's Studies	6	--	67	--	67
SOCIAL SCIENCES (SSC)	243	402	30	26	27
EDUCATION	246	196	33	35	34
TOTAL NUMBER OF STUDENTS	722	1070			
OVERALL ATTRITION RATES			30	29	30

Field of Study. There is a statistically significant (p=0.000) difference in attrition rate when comparing fields of study. For example, humanities has by far the highest attrition rate of any field of study; at 49%, it is well above the average rate at Simon Fraser University. On the other hand, natural sciences has an attrition rate of 19% which is significantly below the university average (see figure 3). These trends are qualitatively similar to those described in the OECD report (1987) and by Cude (1987).

figure 3: Proportion of Leavers and Completers by Field of Study 1985-1990
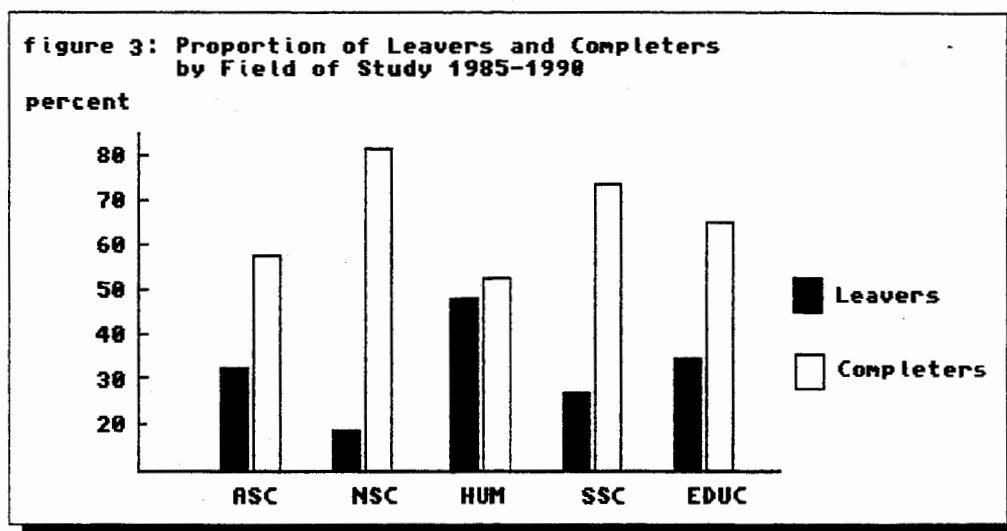
Department. Table 2 shows the attrition rates of female and male master's students by department. It is interesting to note great variations in attainment rates among programs and within a given field of study. For example, psychology and criminology, both social sciences, have attrition rates of 17% and 49% respectively. In computing science and

engineering, both applied sciences, the attrition rates are 18% and 69% respectively. One might well ask, what is happening in these departments that should cause such vast differences in attainment rates?

Time to Final Status. Regardless of final status, women and men at Simon Fraser University spend similar lengths of time in master's programs. It took an average of 9.5 semesters or just over 3 years for a student to complete a master's degree during the years 1985-90. On average, students spent 6.5 semesters or just over 2 years in a program before leaving without a degree. This latter finding is alarming and one might ask why it takes so long for students to make the decision to withdraw. It is crucial that we find the answer to this question as the cost to both the institution, and to the students involved is high.

Table 3 illustrates marked differences in time spent in master's programs across graduate departments and between fields of study. Completers and leavers in the natural and applied sciences tend to spend less time in their programs than students from other fields of study. For example, students who do not complete their degrees in humanities and education leave in the eighth semester on average while those in the applied and natural sciences leave earlier in the fourth semester.

The anticipated time for completion of a master's degree is 2 years. These statistics indicate a considerably longer period of study.

TABLE 3:   Average Number of Semesters Required to Reach
           Final Status by Department, 1985-1990

Department	Semesters Completers	Semesters Leavers
Computing Science	7.8	4.9
Engineering Science	5.6	3.1
Kinesiology	8.9	5.7
Nat'l Resource Management	9.9	7.5
APPLIED SCIENCES	7.9	4.0
Biological Sciences	9.1	4.2
Chemistry	7.3	3.6
Mathematics & Statistics	7.3	4.7
Physics	7.4	1.1
NATURAL SCIENCES	8.2	3.7
English	12.2	9.5
History	10.4	7.6
Languages & Linguistics	10.8	8.1
*Philosopohy	18.0	5.0
HUMANITIES	11.5	8.2
Archaeology	13.2	5.7
Business Administration	8.6	5.2
Communications	10.8	10.5
Criminology	10.9	6.7
Economics	6.3	5.3
Geography	9.1	7.8
Political Science	8.7	8.3
Psychology	7.3	9.2
Sociology & Anthropology	11.8	8.7
Women's Studies	9.5	3.8
SOCIAL SCIENCES	8.9	6.9
EDUCATION	10.3	8.9
OVERALL AVERAGE	9.5	6.5

*Only one student has graduated in the past 5 years.

Note: These data are based on the total elapsed time in
program and do not take into account part-time or on-leave
status.

It is interesting to compare the above findings with Bowman's (1985) report on graduate student progress at Simon Fraser University for the years 1974-1980. At that time a master's degree took an average of 10.3 semesters to complete; unsuccessful students voluntarily withdrew after 4.2 semesters on average. On the one hand it appears that average time to completion has decreased somewhat. A possible explanation is that the number of part-time master's programs has decreased. On the other hand students linger for longer periods of time before withdrawing from their programs.

<u>Cumulative Grade Point Average</u>. An interesting finding is that female master's students have significantly higher CGPA's than male master's students at Simon Fraser University (p=.0176). Studies have shown that women generally achieve significantly better performance records than men across academic fields and at all levels of education, including the graduate level (Hornig, 1987).

In addition, leavers from all fields of study have significantly lower CGPA's than completers (p=0.0001) (see Table 4). This latter finding is difficult to interpret. Is it a reflection of student quality, lack of time to devote to studies, disenchantment with the curriculum and/or quality of teaching which leads to reduced motivation or something else? This finding begs further investigation.

Table 4: Cumulative Grade Point Average and Final Status
by Field of Study

	ASC	NSC	HUM	SSC	EDUC
Completers	3.67	3.61	3.78	3.58	3.70
Leavers	3.41	3.34	3.40	3.35	3.50

Age. Completers are significantly younger than leavers
at Simon Fraser University (p=0.0058) (see figure 4). One
explanation for this finding is that older students have
more responsibilities competing for their time making
graduate studies more difficult. However, in the literature
it is sometimes found that older students complete at a
higher rate than their younger counterparts. Clearly
factors other than increased responsibilities are involved
in determining attrition among older students. These may
include spousal support, increased maturity and experience,
and more goal directedness.

figure 4: Age Distribution of Leavers and Completers
by Field of Study 1985-1990
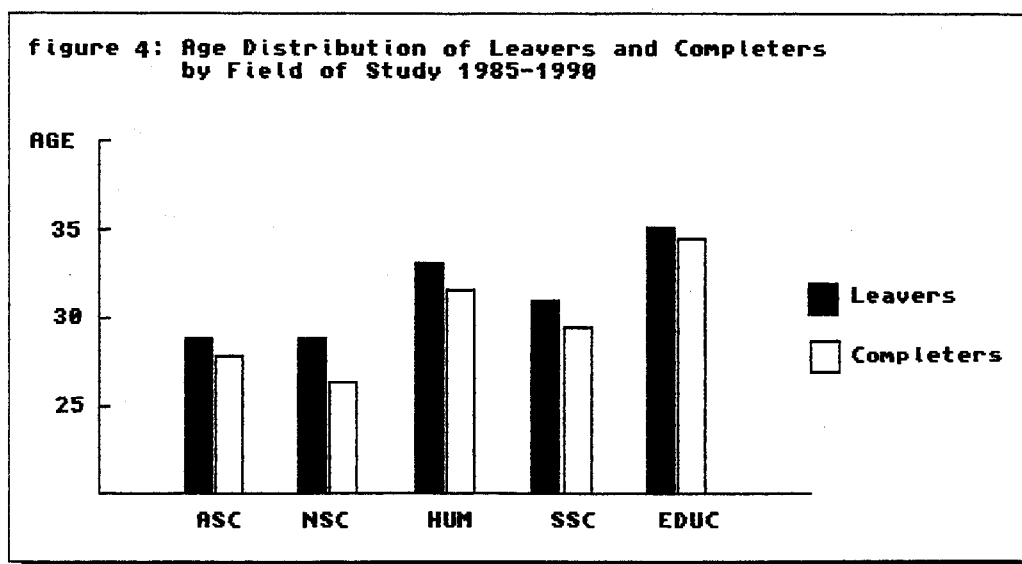
Conclusion

Younger students complete their programs at a higher
rate and tend to be found in full-time low-attrition
departments mainly in the natural and applied sciences where
time to completion rates are also the shortest. These
programs have more money available to their students in
terms of grants and fellowships which helps to account for
the shorter timing of graduate study. With fewer
responsibilities competing for their time and adequate
financial support these students can maintain a single focus
on their studies enhancing their chances for completion.
Thus, the age of the student as well as the chosen field of
study are two likely contributing factors to the attrition
rate.

Leavers tend to be older and have lower cumulative
grade-point averages. Is there a connection? Older
students with greater family responsibilities have less time
to devote to their studies. A related factor may be
financial pressure. Students who need to work either as a
TA or RA and/or have jobs off campus to support themselves
and their families are faced with time pressures and
consequently their studies may suffer. To be an older
student in a field like the humanities where financial aid
is limited and time to completion is lengthy is to be
vulnerable to attrition.

The overall absence of differences between the sexes in
attrition and time to completion rates does not mean that

the graduate experience of female and male students is the same. The reasons for withdrawing may be quite different for women than men. For example, a recent Simon Fraser University survey indicates that 61% of women graduate students are sexually harassed, usually by faculty (Burger, 1986). Also, women are proportionally less likely to be full-time students and therefore are more frequently ineligible for scholarships and assistance. In addition, women study predominantly in the humanities and social sciences, disciplines which are underfunded; well supported fields have low female participation.

Feminist writers (Laurence, 1989) believe that the reason women's participation in higher education decreases at the masters and doctoral level is the hostile environment of the educational system which is patriarchal. Women who do enter graduate study must deal with sexism and a general lack of acceptance (Dagg, 1989; Haley, 1985).

> ...they struggle on in a system defined and designed by men for men which presumes the supports, structures and styles of academic thought of a male constituency not hampered with child care and home responsibilities. (Laurence, 1989, p64)

In light of these possible problems and disadvantages, the finding that women have similar attrition and time to completion rates as men indicates that women must work harder to achieve the same level of success as their male counterparts.

Part-time study puts students at considerable risk of not finishing their studies (OECD, 1987). It is unfortunate

that an analysis of whether full-time and part-time status
as it relates to attrition and time-to-completion rates is
not possible for this study. Full-time and part-time
statistics are available from the Department of Analytical
Studies but are not connected to individual students and
thus a correlation can not be traced.

The main finding is the great variation in completion
rates between departments. Unless Simon Fraser University's
selection process is flawed, we can discount intellectual
differences as a main cause for noncompletion. Rather than
blaming the students, it may be more useful to explore
departmental factors. For example, differing levels of
financial support in the form of fellowships and grants as
opposed to TAships and RAships will affect the amount of
time available to the student to do research. Departments
also differ in the nonfinancial resources and support they
make available to students. For example, certain
departments have greater computing resources and support
staff than other departments. Another important factor
affecting completion may be related to the methodological
differences between disciplines. In the natural sciences,
for example, there is a generally agreed upon methodology
for conducting research which often involves working in a
lab together with peers and under the close supervision of
faculty members. On the other hand, research in the
humanities and social sciences tends to be a solitary
activity which can lead to loneliness, isolation and

discouragement. Yet another factor may involve the attitude of the department toward its students. Are students perceived as a valuable resource or as 'cheap labour' in the form of TAs and RAs? Are they seen by professors as a nuisance taking away valuable time that they would rather spend on their own research? The atmosphere within the department can encourage or discourage students. How the "culture" of the department may contribute to attrition will be explored in subsequent chapters.

Chapter V

Leaving

This section of the chapter describes in narrative form the experiences of six men and six women who left master's programs before degree completion. Each story is presented from the perspective of the leaver and is woven around a single dominant theme that best describes that experience. Each story is a composite portrait of the responses to the written questionnaire and the individual interview. The names of the individuals and certain identifying details have been changed and/or omitted to protect the anonymity of the respondents. In addition, departments have not been identified in order to further assure anonymity.

Leavers in the Course Work Phase of Their Studies

Clayton - Leaving as Being Lost in Self-Doubt

Clayton and I talked about his graduate experience over lunch at a restaurant near his home. He seemed nervous at first but soon became involved in the process of self reflection. His openness and honesty were disarming. Our time together seemed to fly by.

A young man in his mid twenties and recently divorced, Clayton's story centered around his sense of loneliness as

well as confusion and self-doubt about his motives for taking up graduate studies, and his ability to apply himself seriously to any endeavor, a confusion that is accentuated by a long term drug dependency.

Clayton was in his graduate program for only one semester. He was accepted as a master's student less than a year after he completed his undergraduate degree at Simon Fraser University. One of his motives for entering graduate school was to defer his substantial student loan that he had incurred during his undergraduate studies. Readily apparent also was his great love and aptitude for his discipline.

During his graduate studies Clayton derived satisfaction from working as a teaching assistant which he continued to do for a second semester. He was generally satisfied with the department and the people he found there.

Among the practical considerations that led to Clayton's decision to leave was his financial situation. He was denied a student loan because he had purchased a car. Thus, in order to support himself he had to work part-time as well as TAing. This work load made it difficult for him to keep up with his assignments.

As a student, he felt it was impossible to produce work that was defensible in a department where only one faculty member shared his theoretical perspective. This

generated a fear of being evaluated which crippled his

productivity and writing.

> I was putting my whole self out there. My
> whole thoughts, my whole ego is right out
> there exposed with my work... The same
> problem came up - not being sure that I
> was understanding it or not being sure
> that my criticisms [assignments] were
> going to be well received.

It was clear that Clayton's personal life, his

loneliness and depression, affected his ability to focus on

his academic work.

> Being single at that time too was the thing...
> you'd go home to the empty place after school.
> And what would I rather do? Read this [names
> discipline] book or... but it's not like I
> would go out to the bar or something. I've
> never been a person to do that. So it wasn't
> like I was actually out there. But I would
> be sitting there at home thinking well, geez
> if I only had the guts to go out there and
> maybe go meet somebody, or if I wasn't so hung
> up on that... So a lot of it was hemming
> and hawing and pacing the floor at home at
> night.

Clayton believes that his feelings of loneliness and

depression are not legitimate reasons for his inability to

focus on his studies. Instead he labels his behaviors and

feelings as evidence of laziness and noncommitment. His

inability to stop smoking pot is in his eyes yet another

proof of his lack of commitment and self-discipline.

Sarah - Leaving as Returning From Mars

Sarah is a dynamic woman who does not look anywhere

near her 40 years. Our first contact was a lengthy

telephone conversation in which she expressed her outrage

over various aspects of her graduate experience. I was

delighted when Sarah agreed to an interview for the following week.

Sarah's wish to do a master's degree was based on her desire for an intellectual challenge that at the same time would give her a credential to complement her specialist undergraduate degree and open up new career possibilities. The master's program she entered was a complete departure from what she knew. A successful administrator, Sarah used her planning and organizational skills to carefully research what was involved in embarking on such a program and arranged her life so that she had a "three year track" ahead of her.

Sarah trusted that if she completed the prerequisites and was admitted into the program that she would have a good chance of being successful in the program. It was a blow to discover that she had not been given a truthful indication of the preparation needed and that she was ill-prepared for her course work. In addition, she became extremely cynical and felt demeaned and insulted when she (like other students) began to receive marks she did not earn.

> Who is fooling who around here? I did not get a B, a B-, thank you very much! I didn't get a C... On the midterm I got 40% of the answers correct on the test... I got 60% as my mark... just padding your marks. Once you've paid your exorbitant fees you got your B no matter what. It was like you can buy this degree. You show up for 3 years, put up with the nonsense, as long as you pay your money, you'll get your outcome. I found that was very detrimental to your self-esteem. That you really started to question your own values... So I started

to question the whole premise that this
program asks you to give your entire life
to it for three years. No thanks!

Sarah became very dissatisfied with the content, speed

and structure of her program. She was frustrated by the

course material which was far over her head. Due to the

pace of the program she felt under constant pressure.

Students were encouraged to work in pairs and to form study

groups. Sarah, whose field was quite different from most

of her colleagues, often found she was working on

assignments irrelevant to her field.

> This is a joke! This is a slap in the face joke!
> Number one, I don't believe I've really imparted
> anything of real value to me. It's all coming
> like helter-skelter, smatterings of this and
> that and there's really no cohesion in what we
> were doing... I found if you weren't out of
> [names two disciplines], which were the two
> main feed-in streams... it's pretty patchy for
> someone trying to get the basics. You have
> to have the basics before you go into the
> program... I'm pretty outspoken and I'm not
> afraid to make a fool of myself in public...
> but I didn't feel like wasting these people's
> time with my comments when I obviously didn't
> have the foggiest notion of some of the things
> that were being said or going on.

When Sarah applied to the department she was led to

believe that this program was suitable for her.

> They said how they wanted people from all
> different kinds of professions, and it
> made a much more balanced class, and you'd
> all help each other. Well, where's the time
> to help each other? My god!

Sarah took her concerns to a female professor whom she

found approachable.

> I said, I feel a certain distance from the
> program. I don't feel too much a part of
> it. I feel like every Wednesday and Thursday
> I take the bus to Mars. I sit there and
> listen to Martian and go home again having
> made little headway in advanced Martian...

> I said, maybe if I felt more prepared, if
> some of the terminology was already familiar
> I wouldn't feel it such a threat. So I asked
> her for some suggested reading material.

Sarah received a reading list and ordered the books. She

also took a speed reading and study skills course that

summer. Though she felt ambivalent about returning, by

summer's end she had decided she would give it another try.

However, two things happened which changed her mind. She

received notice of a substantial fee increase just before

commencement of the term and she determined from the

outline for her next course that it was irrelevant to her

needs. These factors were the last straw for Sarah who

found the demands of the program so highly stressful.

> I felt my work was suffering, my home life was
> suffering, my friendships were suffering, I was
> suffering. I was not happy. And so the joy of
> learning just wasn't there. It was pressure!
> And I went, this is not what I signed up for!

Craig - Leaving as Blaming Himself

Craig is a single man of 41 years. He invited me to

meet him at his office in the community college where he

holds a highly responsible position. He could not offer me

coffee but he did offer me a pair of sunglasses to ward off

the intense sunlight streaming through his office windows.

Craig wore his sunglasses throughout our conversation and

so I felt he 'remained in hiding' during our time together.

I detected nervous tension in his voice. This was my

shortest interview.

Craig's decision to enter graduate studies stemmed from his intense interest in his field and his desire to apply new knowledge to his career. He had already worked with some faculty members from his chosen graduate department and had developed respect for the quality of the department.

Although Craig had completed his undergraduate degree over an extended time on a part-time basis, he felt he had made a huge mistake in entering graduate studies on a part-time basis in a department geared for full-time study. Time constraints prevented him from having the rich and relevant learning experience he wanted.

> You're trying to combine professional commitments
> at work and study commitments so you find
> yourself running into a class at five to one
> and then having to get out of there at four o'
> clock and go do your homework and spend your
> time in the library when the dynamics behind
> the department is spread over the five or six
> days of the week... Not enough connections
> were made right from the relationships with
> other students to the faculty... And it just
> builds up. At Christmas time and at social
> events you walk in and you don't know anybody.

Craig's work involved international travel which on one occasion forced him to withdraw from a course. In addition, he was given an administrative position part way through his studies which meant his time became even more precious. To compound his situation even further, Craig was involved in two serious accidents which immobilized him for a time and interfered with his progress. However, his decision to withdraw after completing three courses was based as much on the feedback Craig's professors gave him

about his poor writing skills as on the other reasons

mentioned.

> It became such a lack of confidence in the
> writing ability, I didn't want to write
> anything. Christ, I'll take any course
> you want, do anything you want, but just
> make sure I've got objective exams...
> don't give me anything to write. And if I
> wrote, I agonized over it... for weeks and
> then all of a sudden get it done and do
> alright in the course. But I found that a
> 10 page paper to write to me was like... I
> used to write every day... Since I've left
> graduate school I've spent a lot of time
> at Simon Fraser's downtown campus taking
> writing courses.

Craig's feelings of incompetence in his writing skills

made him less tolerant of the thesis process. He had

decided on a research topic and had formed a committee.

His committee members, however, left the department and

Craig found a new senior supervisor whose background best

suited his study.

> She was a pain in the ass. I didn't like her.
> In fact no students did. None of the students
> did. She was very authoritarian. She was very
> domineering. She was very strong willed... And
> a lot of other students changed supervisors and
> committees because of her...

She was pushing Craig to focus on her special area of

interest which interested him but to the exclusion of his

broader interests.

> It became an academic exercise and since
> I'm a poor writer academic exercises don't
> thrill me.

Craig has a strong love for higher education and spoke

highly of the department, the courses and the professors.

He even praised his second supervisor for her academic

prowess. He blamed himself entirely for not succeeding in completing his degree. In his words, he "screwed up".

Betty - Leaving as Being the Victim of Hypocrisy

Betty is a middle aged single mother. She and her eleven year old daughter live in a modest home in East Vancouver. We sat in her kitchen sipping tea as she discussed her experience as a graduate student in the humanities.

Betty's reason for reentering higher education twenty years after her first degree was career related; she wanted to teach in a community college. She chose Simon Fraser because she had enjoyed her undergraduate experience there. She was also advised by a friend who is on a hiring committee at a community college that the politics at Simon Fraser was less traumatizing than that at the University of British Columbia.

Her experience revolves around a sense of betrayal in a department that presents itself as feminist. As the sole support of her child, Betty worked while she studied. To supplement her income she applied to the department for a tutor marker position which would give her the flexibility of working at home. However, the department gave her a teaching assistantship instead which required her to be on campus late into the afternoon. Thus she would not get home until quite late which left her child alone several nights a week. This was further compounded by her having

to take a mandatory course that ran late into the afternoon
on another night. She approached both her colleagues and
faculty to request their cooperation in rescheduling the
TAship and her course so she could get home on time to be
there for her child. That cooperation was not forthcoming.
This soured Betty's feelings toward the department from the
beginning leaving her in a cynical state of mind.

> I found that in my situation as a single mother
> that no one would exhibit any flexibility to
> accommodate my needs. So I thought it was bad
> enough when you get a bunch of men who refuse
> to be flexible, but when you get a bunch of women
> claiming to be feminists who are completely
> inflexible... it has really stuck in my craw...
> I just felt that everybody was a hypocrite there.

This hypocrisy left her feeling alienated, hurt and angry -
a stranger in a strange land. As a result, she chose to
have minimal contact with other students in the program.
Rather than risk encountering her colleagues, Betty
preferred to sit in her car until just before her classes
began.

As with other mature students in the department, she
had difficulty adjusting to the status of student. There
was no recognition of her skills and experience she brought
to the department. This left her feeling demeaned.

> I would have thought they'd be glad to have me
> because I've published quite a bit and I could
> be published quite a bit more... But nobody
> really had any interest... I think it's just
> hard when you have some confidence in yourself
> [and] you've practised the profession to come
> back to be treated like a kind of brainless
> little machine.

Her two semesters in the program created a lot of
strain in her small family affecting her relationship with

her child as well as affecting the child's own academic
performance and behavior. This only added to her despair.
With emotion Betty described the occasion of her decision
to leave:

> I... got off phoning Cathy; she was home alone;
> she was sick. She was here by herself. She
> hadn't had supper. It was sleeting up there on
> the hill and the class was supposedly over at
> 8:20. Well, at 8:45 everybody was still going
> strong... and I just picked up and left. It
> was February, and I was worried about my kid
> and what was happening and how could I do all
> this. And then I couldn't find my car... it
> took me about another 20 minutes out in the
> sleet. And then I burst into tears. And it
> just occurred to me. I don't have to do this.
> Nobody is making me do this. I can drive away
> in the night and never come back. So that's
> pretty well what I did...

Leavers in the Thesis Phase of Their Studies

Martin - Leaving as Losing the Fight

I met Martin at his home in the early evening. His
wife was working late and so I found him in the midst of
putting his precocious preschoolers to bed. I was
impressed with his parenting and his friendly relaxed
manner with me. During the course of our conversation his
feelings of frustration and anger about his graduate
experience emerged with force.

Martin entered his master's program five years ago
when he was 38 years old. He had completed two
undergraduate degrees, one of which was an honors degree
some three years previously. Graduate school was a dream
of his. Thus when his work contract ended he entered

graduate school with great enthusiasm and expectations. He chose Simon Fraser because of its reputation in his field of interest and on the strength of a former professor's recommendation. Martin, his wife and first born infant moved to Vancouver just days before his classes were to begin.

Martin was a full-time student during his first year of study. He and his family were able to live on the two scholarships he received and his income from his teaching assistantships as well as some savings they had. Among the ten students who began the program with Martin, he was one of two students to finish their course work 'on time' in two terms. He found that the course work did not meet his expectations:

> The course work was disappointing. I expected a lot more from a graduate program having gone through what I did as an undergraduate. I expected that I was going to have this really profound experience and really be required to work. I was required to work but it was more busy work than anything else.

Martin described the atmosphere in the department as a barren wilderness with each individual forming his or her own little isolated community with minimal contact with others either on an intellectual or social basis. This proved to be very annoying and demoralizing to him due to his gregariousness and prior expectations about what the nature of an intellectual community should be.

It was after the completion of his course work that Martin began to run into difficulties. He had a thesis

topic that he thought was "really exciting" but was unable to get as far as writing a proposal.

> I felt like I had to fight with him [supervisor] to get him interested in what I wanted to do. And he seemed to be saying all the time that he didn't want to do it for me. I felt constantly that my thesis and my work to put it together was more a source of annoyance for my supervisor than it was anything he was interested in... I'd go to him with what I thought was an idea and he'd argue with me about the fact that I was coming to him and he had this sense I was trying to get him to write my thesis for me. I don't know what in the hell he was talking about! I was trying to explore ideas and find out how to get started and he kept wanting me to bring him something all the time. Well, I couldn't even get to that point because I couldn't get it out of my head. I was trying to figure out what sort of ideas I wanted to pursue but I couldn't sit down and have a conversation with him about it because he didn't seem to want to have a conversation about it. I fought this for three and a half years.

One reason why Martin took so long to change supervisors was that work and family obligations (including the birth of his second child) diverted his energy and his time away from resolving this impasse. Another reason was his sense of being on the weaker end of the power differential and his perceived dependency on his supervisor. This is not to say that Martin did not attempt to assert himself in this situation. For example:

> I remember getting into this huge screaming match with him on the phone once... I hadn't been able to have a conversation with him that he seemed to think was appropriate! So I finally said, "Well, how should I use my committee?" And that's when he got angry with me! He apologized to me the next day but he still didn't do anything differently. I never did get an answer.

Martin made two attempts to form a new committee. The first time he encountered the petty politics of the department.

> I approached another prof in the department.
> He took me into his office and it was very
> secretive. "Be careful how you do this.
> We don't want to offend."

In his last year, Martin made up his mind to try again. To his surprise he found that his supervisor had withdrawn from his committee three months previously and was on sabbatical. Neither his supervisor nor the department informed him of these events.

This time he found a supervisor who was both interested and helpful. Unfortunately time was fast running out. His supervisor told him that the only way he could complete the degree was by dedicating himself full-time to his studies for one year at the expense of his family life. Martin was not prepared to do this.

> I told him not only would my family not be
> ignored, but I'm not going to ignore my
> family. I just won't do it! They're much
> more important than that!

The department was not willing to entertain any extensions and so Martin withdrew with one term left in his five year tenure.

The experience left Martin feeling frustrated, angry and defrauded. He perceived the department as being a hindrance rather than a help throughout the thesis phase of his studies. They were working against him. He was angry about the lack of concern and interest. A classic example of this was the fact that no one told him his supervisor

had left. Martin would "go back in a minute" if his committee could offer him sufficient time to complete his thesis while still keeping in mind his other responsibilities.

Gwendolyn - Leaving as Letting Go of a Dream

Gwendolyn is a single mother in her mid forties with two teen aged children. We discussed her graduate experience over a cup of tea in her cozy apartment. Our conversation was both lengthy and intense. Though she did not show her emotions, I could sense pain and bitterness radiating from her. Her need to tell her story was single minded and of all my interviewees, she required the least prompting.

Gwendolyn overcame many obstacles, such as being a high school leaver and commencing post secondary education late in life, in order to realize her dream of embarking on a master's degree:

> I really would have enjoyed... teaching at the
> university level... If I had the master's degree
> I would be able to work for a few years and then
> when I was tired of working and wanted more
> academia, I could go back to do the doctorate and
> spend the fall of my life teaching. This was my
> plan. My life plan.

Sadly her dream slowly died, crushed under the weight of financial and workload pressures.

Gwendolyn who had completed her undergraduate degree in this department was encouraged by several professors to pursue graduate studies. She was given the false

impression that there was financial aid available. Despite
her 3.94 graduate grade point average, her applications for
scholarships were unsuccessful. This meant that she had to
take on a heavy teaching assistantship load as well as
outside work in order to support herself, her children and
pay for her studies. The overwhelming work load left her
exhausted, burned out and on the verge of a breakdown.

Due to her tenacity and organizational skills, she was
able to complete her course work and make a substantial
beginning on her thesis work.

> I was so aware of being under so much pressure
> that I could not allow even the beginning of
> a crack because I would have ended up in the
> hospital. I knew that. So, everything else
> had to shut down... It was like each day was
> all I could think about. And I had to focus
> all my energy on that one day. So, I had these
> elaborate plans... I had big charts on the
> wall so that everything was mapped out and
> color coded. And what I would do is focus on
> that one square which was just one day... I
> could have a sense of where I was going and
> what I was doing.

The pressure of her work load was also felt by her
family. Her two children did everything in their power to
help their mother during this time including not discussing
their own problems in order to spare her the extra stress.

> There was a period of time toward the end of that
> last semester when my youngest son who had just
> turned 16 was under a tremendous strain. And I
> did not know that because he had not shared that
> with me, because as he told me later, he... didn't
> want to add to it [her stress]. And then one night
> ... I came home early because I had this horrible
> headache... and I heard this terrible crying.
> And I went upstairs and here was my boy just
> sobbing. And he was then upset because I had
> seen this and he had been keeping it away from
> me... And I felt so incredibly guilty that I
> hadn't even noticed.

Because there were virtually no TAships available during the summer, Gwendolyn sought and found full-time outside employment. She was laid off after four months and for financial reasons took a leave of absence from her studies.

At this point she applied for and got an executive position in her field, the kind she would have hoped for upon completion of her degree. One of the reasons she accepted this position was that she had accrued a heavy debt load from her undergraduate years which she soon had to start repaying. The added expense of the monthly payments on her debts on top of her normal expenses ate up most of her salary thus she could not, for the next year, afford the tuition fees. Furthermore work pressures over the first year on the job required that she make a decision as to whether she should continue her studies. There was not enough time for both.

Her committee proved inflexible on the time line for the completion of her thesis. The department had an unwritten rule that the master's degree had to be completed within two years.

> If it's five years, that's what I have. I felt
> like they changed the rules on me when I got in
> there because I had never intended to finish it
> in two years. I didn't think that I could because
> I knew I had to get in and out and start making
> money... I wonder how some of this happens. I think
> that some of the faculty have got to have gone
> through this. It's like doctors. They just about
> kill their young doctors in residency.

Joseph - Leaving as Paying the Price for Idealism

Joseph and I met at a lounge at Simon Fraser University. A man in his mid thirties, Joseph wore an earring and long hair tied back. I found him to be an engaging individual. The greater part of the discussion was held on an intellectual plane revolving around his great passions which are his discipline and theoretical perspective.

His educational background includes an honors BA, a certificate in journalism and a teaching certificate. However he does not work in any of the fields in which he holds his credentials. He is a man who is struggling to understand himself and his values as they relate to his career and life choices which up to this point have left him feeling less than a success.

He entered graduate studies for reasons he felt were not those of a serious student. Joseph enjoyed the academic lifestyle for its own sake and wanted to be a teaching assistant. In his mind a serious student is someone who single mindedly pursues the credential for a given goal and 'plays the establishment game'. He felt like a phoney.

Joseph enjoyed most of his courses and achieved a 4.0 average. He recognized that he was not a good match for the department as no professor there held his theoretical perspective. Thus when it came time to write his thesis, Joseph found that his approach was unacceptable. In an

effort to please his committee he rewrote his first three chapters three different times. Each time he was met with serious criticism. While he was beginning to sense "what would fly and what wouldn't", it occurred to Joseph that if he were to complete, he would have to let go of his beliefs. It would be his supervisors' thesis, not his. He decided his principles were more important than the credential and left the program during his 4th year.

Joseph's analysis of why he didn't complete centers around his own perceived deficiencies rather than the deficiencies of the department or his committee.

> For quite some time, at least two years anyway,
> I don't think I was telling people honestly all
> the problems and the difficulties I had with the
> thesis that would reflect less than credibly on
> me. I wasn't saying for instance that I was lazy,
> that I was under motivated, that I was never
> serious about it, that I was only in it for the
> money [earnings from TAships], all which has truth.
> I was hitting on things like they [members of his
> committee] didn't understand me... tailoring it to
> the audience. I wanted to write a great piece of
> work which would bring together all the social
> sciences and [my discipline]; they wanted a narrow
> [interdisciplinary approach]... It's easy to make
> this kind of thing sound good if you're glib.

Elizabeth - Leaving as Losing an Uphill Battle

I knocked on the back door. A tall attractive woman in her early thirties greeted me with a big smile and led me into her kitchen where the smell of freshly baked muffins filled the air. It was 9:00 am. Her two young children played happily in the back yard while we discussed her graduate experience.

Elizabeth had had a very positive undergraduate experience in the department she chose for graduate studies. Her extensive experience as a research assistant and her love for this work led her to pursue a graduate degree. While working as a research assistant at UBC, her decision was sealed when she was introduced to a professor from her former department who invited her to be a student with him.

Elizabeth was a full-time student for her first 21/2 years of study. She was married at the end of her first year and became pregnant by the end of her second year. She was on-leave for most of the remainder of her 5 years in the department. While health issues and family responsibilities (Elizabeth did not want to put her children into day care) played a part in her leaving, Elizabeth also felt that the system had failed her.

Elizabeth was surprised to find that the course work was not as stimulating as it had been at the undergraduate level. She felt bored and at the same time intimidated by all the jargon. This shook her confidence. The two professors that Elizabeth had related to well as an undergraduate had left the department leaving her without a support system.

After taking a course from her supervisor, she began to have misgivings about him and when she learned through other students that he had never gotten a student through

the program, she decided to switch supervisors. This

switch involved changing her research focus.

Her second supervisor was competent but not very

accessible even though Elizabeth worked for her as a

research assistant.

> She was the chair of the department... and she
> was administratively very busy. Graduate
> students were low on her list as far as I
> could see... And she travelled a lot. She did
> a lot of international work so she was away
> quite a bit. And if you did get to see her
> there was a line up outside her door, about
> five people outside her door. So, you had to
> discuss anything under pressure. You had five,
> ten minutes maybe to talk to her... You were
> on your own.

While she had presented her first proposal at a

colloquium as part of her course work, Elizabeth did not

have the same opportunity for feedback with her second

proposal except at a very informal level with students who

had formed a support group.

> She [supervisor] wasn't interested in looking at
> your research method. She wanted to see what was
> on paper. Like, 'write something up for me and let
> me see it'. This is what I finally figured out...
> Maybe she trusted you enough to think, well you
> know what you're doing research wise...

Elizabeth was not able to get the support she needed

to gain momentum in her research.

> I don't really think that I wanted to be led
> around by the hand either. A lot of it was just
> having interest in what you were doing and trying
> to get some enthusiasm going for what you did
> because as a grad student you have a lot of
> insecurities about 'why am I doing this'. Just
> some kind of encouragement, you know? It's just
> so basic!

Education is a strong value for Elizabeth. Both

parents are university educators. This fact and the time,

effort and money she had invested in her education made it difficult to turn her back on her goal. She continues to struggle with her anger at the system and her sense of failure in not having completed her program.

> At the time I thought, well I can't do this on my own. There must be something wrong that I can't figure this all out on my own.

Andre - Leaving as Living in Pain

Andre, a tall, handsome man in his early thirties met me at my place of work. We walked to a nearby restaurant and talked over drinks. He spoke in a slow deliberate fashion which mirrored his intensity and inner anger.

Andre completed his undergraduate degree in an eastern university. He chose Simon Fraser University to do his master's program because one of the leading authorities in his field is a faculty member here. Despite his 'fairly low' grade point average in his undergraduate studies, Andre believes he was accepted as a master's student on the basis of recommendations from several faculty members as well as his chosen supervisor from Simon Fraser with whom he had corresponded.

He entered the program with the full expectation that his relationship with his supervisor would be that of a student - mentor relationship. What he found was that his supervisor was of little or no help, and that his colleagues were his main resource and support.

> And it was only because of these people that I learned half of what I was supposed to know. I never found it out from my supervisor. I

didn't know what was expected in regards to
a thesis. I didn't know what the whole time
frame was. I didn't know how one was
supposed to defend a thesis. The basics -
the content and the process...

Feeling "unsteady" on his feet, Andre found solace

from his colleagues who were as dissatisfied with the

quality of their supervision as he was.

This is what we would sit around and beef
about because we were very dissatisfied
by it... and I think judging from my own
informal polling that [their] expectations
were very similar to mine. And when they
came into the bright light of reality,
the harsh bright light of reality, it was
quite a withering experience.

In several areas supervision fell short of Andre's

needs. The first of these areas is moral support.

You hope that when you've completed the
research that you banter it around a little
bit, that just through conversation, you can
reinforce it in your own mind, that through the
questions or the comments that are made by
somebody else that they will show the weakness
of your research and the areas that need to be
explored a little further perhaps. That didn't
happen... it would be nice to have somebody
reinforce it, somebody to tell you you're on
the right track. A little moral support,
because this is an incredibly isolating
experience.

Another area where his supervisor fell short was in

giving Andre a clear and realistic idea of what a master's

thesis is - its scope and the standards it has to meet.

Andre's view made the thesis a daunting requirement.

When you're writing a thesis and it's going to
be criticized, it's going to be torn apart and
made available to the public then there is a
whole new set of expectations that come along
with that... And you want to be darned sure that
the material that you are writing up can hold
water. Plus there is the standard expectation
of most grad students that this is the "be all
and the end all" of their topic... that they

want to make this the definitive work on their
subject... They want to make this the sterling
work that will stand for a long time and be
hailed... look at the brilliance of this person
who has written this thesis that is cited all
over the place!

Yet another unmet need in supervision was guidance as

to the methodology and structure best suited to his work.

I was hoping that before you even sit down and
write, you've got to establish a framework
for your work... Just to be able to sit
down and say, "Look, I found all this stuff but
how do I put it all together?" I can talk
about the individual aspects of it; I can do the
different chapters but what about that intro and
what about that conclusion and how do you establish
your framework?

Compounding these problems was that Andre was

intimidated by his supervisor which made it very difficult

for him to seek the guidance he needed.

Maybe it's just personality, or maybe it's
self-styled, but I just felt very intimidated
in a lot of ways by him. He had been moving
away from the area that I came to study with
him... So I sort of felt well, "Gee whiz, I
know you're not interested in this anymore, but
could we kind of talk about this?" He never gave
me any indication that we was really interested
in what I was doing.

Andre felt ill-prepared and confused about what was

expected of him as a graduate student. The lack of

orientation, instruction and supervision left him with the

impression that he was supposed to know many things which

he did not and since he did not, he was deficient in some

way. Andre was careful to guard his image as someone who

knew all he 'should' know as a graduate student.

I was trying very hard to figure out what the
hell was expected of me. I never knew. I was
faking it. I was dancing... You're supposed to be
bright, intelligent and capable, so you go out and
research and do what is expected of you... you should
know all these things, so don't make an ass of

yourself by asking stupid questions. The confusion
just sets in... And what are you supposed to do?
So rather than do anything, perhaps it was just
easiest and safest for me to do nothing.

The result was that Andre found himself paralysed in

the writing process, a paralysis that was a result of his

lack of confidence in meeting his unrealistic expectations.

When I came into the program I had no trouble
writing papers... But all of a sudden I had this
different level of writing that was expected of
me and I couldn't write anymore... I know I am
capable of writing; I am capable of producing a
decent piece but everything I was writing was
coming out as gibberish... I was rehashing,
rehashing, rehashing and nothing I wanted to
write came out the way I wanted it to come out.
I had a vision of the way I wanted it to sound...
It wasn't happening.

During his graduate studies Andre worked as a teaching

assistant and a research assistant. He co-authored a book

with one of his committee members. His whole life revolved

around his department and his identity as a graduate

student. Near the end of his tenure as a graduate student

he fell into despair.

There were some very very serious, some very
dark thoughts passing through my mind... Throw
myself off a bridge and put an end to it and that
will end this quick and simple, and make it easy...
I want to do this degree; I can't do it. Shit!
Who cares! No one, no one seems to give a shit!

Andre's graduate experience was a shattering one which

left him with strong feelings of failure and a sense of

having lost a portion of himself.

When you're supposed to have the skills, when
you're supposed to have the knowledge, and
you're supposed to have all the advantages
that are attributed to that degree then when
you are not able to do it, then all of a
sudden it starts affecting the way that you
look at yourself. And that's been probably
one of the most important things that has
happened to me with this degree is that it's

really shaken me up... I came in with a lot
more confidence than I did when I went out.

Presently Andre is working as a researcher in his

field, a position he is very pleased to have and one he

would have sought upon completion of his degree. He

continues to have a strong need to complete his thesis.

> I still intend to take advantage of the
> regulation that allows me to re-enter for
> one semester and complete the degree because
> if I don't, there's going to be a really big
> hole that I don't think I will be able to
> accommodate.

Jessica - Leaving as an Agonizing "Letting Go"

Jessica and I met at her home one evening. She had

just tucked her young child into bed and her husband was

working late so we had the house to ourselves. This proved

to be a difficult conversation for Jessica who got in touch

with some unfinished grief over her graduate experience.

Her decision to enter graduate school ten years after

completing her undergraduate degree was based on career

considerations. She wanted a break from the work she was

doing and was realizing that to continue doing interesting

work at her present salary level, a master's degree was

essential. Jessica was not certain about which degree she

should seek and in the end chose a generalist program that

would afford her a number of options in terms of career

possibilities.

During her tenure as a graduate student, Jessica

served as a graduate student representative and worked as a

research assistant. She enjoyed the support and comraderie
of her colleagues, was generally satisfied with her courses
and also felt that her experience with her thesis
supervisor was "very positive".

Funding became an issue for Jessica who took a 11/2
year break after completing her course work.

> The department generally had a policy that they
> would support students for about two years...
> But after the two years were up I found that I
> had used up a fair chunk of my savings and so
> part of my decision to leave the program and
> work full-time was because I needed to earn
> money to finish it off.

Jessica spent a year researching her thesis. She
collected hundreds of documents. Having never done this
type of research before, Jessica did not have a sense of
how to "sift it, how to make sense of it". She spent the
next six months developing an elaborate coding scheme.

> I felt a lot on my own... I did that to myself
> thinking I had to have it more together before
> I approach my supervisor and try to do the next
> stage of it. So, I think I could have been more
> assertive about my needs and the kind of help I
> needed but I wasn't sure of the help I needed
> which was part of the problem. So the research
> part and grappling with the logistics took a lot
> more time and energy than I ever expected it would.
> And so I felt like I got bogged in this swamp of
> material.

While Jessica found her supervisor approachable, the
initial message she received made Jessica reluctant to call
upon her time and help.

> She made some comment about being happy to work
> with me knowing that I wouldn't be a... something
> like she wouldn't have to pull me through. I
> wouldn't be a dragger. That kind of idea. That
> I was basically a self-initiating type and she
> wouldn't have to hold my hand. I think that was
> the term... So I guess for some reason that really
> stuck with me. And so... in the first year of

doing the research I was really hesitant to approach her.. to say I needed help... And I must say every time that I said help she was very good about giving it. But she wasn't the type to call me up and ask how things were going. And maybe I would have done better with that kind of support.

Jessica's decision to leave was formulated over a number of critical periods. The first time of questioning was after she completed her course work.

> That was a point at which I thought, 'Am I really prepared to finish this degree? Is this the degree for me to be doing right now?' And I thought I'll take some time out. I need to earn some money anyway and that'll give me a chance to rethink it.

The second critical period was during the time when she was collecting data for her research.

> I thought, 'This is so tedious and strung out and it's taking me so long to begin to collect the stuff and I still have the sifting and writing to do. Am I going to be able to do it?'

The third critical period was after Jessica became pregnant.

> I thought, 'I'm going to try and finish before my [child] is born.' And I realized as I got into the process... that there was no way that I was going to be able to complete it in that time. I just had such a volume of stuff. I couldn't see a way to do it. So, that again became a kind of question mark.

Once her child was born, Jessica took a break from her studies to devote herself to parenting. Her husband looked after their daughter during his two month summer breaks to give Jessica concentrated blocks of time to work on her thesis. Her slow progress once again created a time of questioning.

> So after the first summer... again I had a question mark about how realistically am I going to do this because I wasn't prepared to put my daughter in full-time child care

> at that age in order to give full-time
> attention to it. So I thought, 'Okay, I'll
> do what I can this summer and next summer
> when she's almost two. I'll take another crack
> at it and try and finish the writing that
> summer. So that was last summer. And by the
> end of the summer I had done a good bit of
> writing... but it was agonizing to do it...
> And it was much slower writing than I had
> expected it would be. So again at the end of
> the summer I really began to question how
> realistic it was...

Underlying these points of questioning was Jessica's

growing doubt that her research and the type of work it

represented was truly what she wanted to be doing.

> Any work I've ever done whether it's paid work
> or voluntary work is always work that has
> mattered to me. It's work that I feel is
> important and it has some sort of social
> merit. That's just the kind of person I am.
> And so the further I went along with my
> thesis the less and less it resonated with
> me. The more I kept asking, who cares
> about it?

Feeling very discouraged about how slowly the writing

was progressing and how much more she had left to do, she

began to grapple with the idea of leaving the program.

> I really wrestled with it last fall. And I
> guess that was the first time that I really
> came to terms with the fact that I might not
> finish. And so I decided to take a month where
> I just imagined what my life would be like if
> I simply let it go... And I did some work with
> clay and I did some journal writing... and it
> was the process of doing those things that
> allowed me to just let it go. It was still
> really agonizing.

Jessica admits she has not been able to totally let it

go. She keeps all her research in her basement and wonders

if it will ever be useful to her in her work or if she

might try to finish it.

Jessica quietly sobbed at the end of our conversation, overcome by the feelings that were generated.

> So much of my sense of self became invested
> in that master's program and so I had
> identified myself for so many years as a
> master's student, that to let that go
> without having successfully completed the
> degree was really quite shaking to my
> self-esteem and where I was going with my
> life and if I was no longer a master's
> student what would be next...

Philip - Leaving as Maintaining Dignity

I was struck by Philip's energy and enthusiasm. His list of credentials, including a master's degree, reflect his thirst for knowledge and his enjoyment of things academic. His goal for pursuing a professional master's degree was to become a community college instructor.

This was Philip's second attempt at completing this degree. On the first occasion, he had completed all the course work and research for his thesis when he and his wife accepted teaching positions in a remote part of Canada. In his words, "end of phase one". Ten years later Philip reapplied and was accepted into the program on the stipulation that he take a full year of course work and do a new thesis. Once again Philip withdrew when he was all but completed.

Philip's problems revolved around his relationship with his committee members. Since his senior supervisor did not have the expertise in the area that Philip was doing his thesis, it was understood that the second member

of the committee would be acting as the senior supervisor.
On the strength of the formal senior supervisor's approval,
Philip then proceeded with his research and write-up
without consulting his acting senior supervisor. He fully
expected his thesis to be passed with only minor revisions.

He researched and wrote up his thesis over a one year
period and handed it in to his formal senior supervisor who
then passed it on to the acting senior supervisor. While
the formal senior supervisor approved the thesis, the
acting supervisor rejected it on the grounds that it
required "academic justification". Philip was offended
because he was not contacted personally by his acting
senior supervisor who had passed on his objections to the
formal senior advisor who then contacted Philip.

When Philip contacted his acting senior supervisor, he
was treated in a very summary fashion. His further
attempts to make contact with him by leaving telephone
messages were unsuccessful. As a result of this treatment,
he formally withdraw from the program. Philip sent a copy
of his letter of withdrawal to his acting senior supervisor
who did not respond to Philip's communication.

Philip was pleasantly surprised to be contacted by the
department's graduate assistant who was concerned by his
decision. Philip indicated his willingness to return to
the program if he were allowed to select a new second
supervisor. The graduate chair person refused this request
stating that there was no need to "punish" the second

supervisor. Upon being informed of this, his decision to withdraw was final.

> Maybe I'm just not politically aware to... go out
> and play, go out and pretend you've done some
> more research. Go out and make a dutiful
> choice... Grab your forelock and say, 'Yas, um
> boss, I did it.' And do it! I know I'm being
> facetious. But there's a certain level of that
> in every program. It doesn't necessarily make
> the program any less valuable. There are hoops
> to jump through... Maybe ten years ago, maybe
> fifteen years ago when having the letters meant
> more to me, I probably would have done that. I
> did it in my undergraduate school. I did things
> that were totally ludicrous... Maybe I expected
> too much of the system... Maybe I had expected
> above average treatment. I don't know... In my
> own mind, no I don't think I expected too much.
> I expected to get professional feedback from
> somebody who is in a profession, who has some
> source knowledge. I expected a lot more than
> I got... To get told by the first [supervisor]
> that the second [supervisor] doesn't like it and
> to have to chase the second [supervisor] for some
> feedback and have it be limited to a 15 minute
> telephone call which he cuts off; says he'll
> phone me back and doesn't... Forget it! I don't
> know what the bounds are here. I don't know what
> the rules of this game are. But, I obviously don't
> want to play anymore.

Joan - Leaving as Escaping Slavery

Joan is a charming woman who is able to find humor in her difficult experience as a master's student. Ironically, her former supervisor called Joan during our interview wanting the bibliography from one of her papers. Joan found this particularly amusing as her story will explain.

She did her undergraduate studies at Simon Fraser University and had worked as a research scientist for the Federal government. Upon returning to Vancouver she found

very little work in her field and also felt a need for
intellectual stimulation. Thus she decided to enter
graduate school.

The difficulties she encountered revolved around her
supervisor's personality. The supervisor's attitudes
toward financing her students resulted in Joan receiving
minimal financing.

> She never contributed financially at all.
> She didn't support any of my applications
> for graduate funding. She always said she
> was going to hire me as a research assistant
> and never did. There was always somebody
> else that... oh, poor situation, oh this or
> that... She did some shitty things, I
> think. She hired me for a job that didn't
> exist. And I had made changes in my work
> schedule to accommodate this because I had
> looked at all of this as an opportunity to
> really move forward in terms of my research...
> She hired me as a research assistant in the
> morning and the very same afternoon she gave
> the job to somebody else. That's not an
> exaggeration. That's honestly what happened.

Thus during her five years in the program she had to rely
on teaching assistantships and outside work to finance her
studies. But even in this her supervisor interfered in
ways that would cost her a position.

> I would get a job and she would contact the
> department... I'd do it independently like
> I've always done everything which was part
> of the problem for her. I didn't seek her
> out for every choice I made. And then she
> would contact the department and advise them
> that I didn't have time that particular
> semester to fulfil that contract. And she
> would pull the contract on me totally
> unbeknownst to me!

Her supervisor attempted to exploit Joan in the same
manner that she exploited her other students.

> She had her graduate students doing a lot of
> her work for her and I had to proof a

bibliography for a reference for her paper.
And clearly what she'd done is just given
me a reference from some other paper... it
was a lot of work. And I did it at first and
then I thought, this is abusive! I'm not
going to do this again. For what? But she was
very power centered and a number of students
did feed into that. And they felt there was
some sort of privilege associated with doing
this kind of thing and I never viewed it that
way... She was interested in being a prolific
writer and she used her graduate students to
that end as well. Oh, she'd have them draft
abstracts. She'd have them write... and not
as hired research assistants. Just as a
manipulative component of... and as I said,
a lot of graduate students considered this
to be some indication that they were
superior. Like, it was a privilege! Oh,
yes, and she used that too. I just had a
different perspective from day one. I think
I saw it for what it was. Some people to this
day see it otherwise. But, really I think
that it was abusive, abusive treatment of
graduate students.

The result of all of this is that the rapport between

Joan and her supervisor was destroyed.

We butted heads at some point and I'm not
sure what the genesis of that was... but I
think in retrospect, it was because I just
refused to be a slave... Control is paramount
in her. And that's not conducive in an
advisory situation.

Thus, as Joan struggled to produce a proposal, she received

no guidance or feedback and she felt she could not approach

her supervisor to discuss the problems she was having.

In fact, I would make an appointment with her
and she'd be unable to meet with me for like
six weeks. This is quite routine... They
[committee] just said, "Bring me your proposal."
And part of my problem is that I'm just a real
perfectionist and so I kept rehashing this
design and... it just never progressed. But I
thought that was perhaps not the most productive
approach to say, "Write up a proposal. Bring it
to me," when the research design is perhaps the
most significant part of the thesis where you
need advisory support.

During her studies Joan experienced several crises in her personal life including the break up of her primary relationship, having to be the sole caretaker of an ailing relative and her own struggle with cancer. She took these situations in her stride behaving in a proactive fashion. Joan was clear that these were not the most significant factors that played a role in her decision to withdraw. Rather, it was her relationship with her supervisor and her own perfectionism that conspired against completion.

Thematic Analysis

In this section the thematic threads which connect the various leavers are traced and examined. The analysis indicates that the leavers fall into four natural categories. These categories are based on gender and time in program. The time leavers spend in graduate school can be divided into two categories - the course work phase and the thesis phase. Leavers in each of these two groups have distinctly different themes which characterize their graduate experience. There are also gender based differences.

The four students who left during the course work phase report practical problems such as receiving inadequate information about their program, financial problems and departmental inflexibility in taking their individual situation into account as well as scholastic problems mainly expressed as a lack of confidence in their

writing ability. The women focus more on practical problems while the men focus more on competency issues.

The eight students who left during the thesis phase emphasize problems with supervision and related problems in the research or writing up of the thesis. While both genders experience these problems, women generally find them exacerbated by role conflicts and financial problems whereas men generally focus more directly on the supervisory relationship as the central issue.

There are a number of common thematic threads that transcend both gender differences and time in program. These are: (1) **material support** which pertains to financial issues, the role of TAships and RAships, and lack of flexibility to accommodate mature students' needs; (2) **emotional support** which refers to the attitude between the university and its master's students, lack of information regarding graduate school culture, and student role conflict; (3) **academic** and (4) **intellectual support:** academic is distinguished from intellectual support in that the former refers to course offerings and the knowledge of procedures and processes - "the rules of the game", while the latter refers to supervisory consultation, direction and feedback. These categories or themes naturally flow into one another and are not easily separated. For example, intellectual support provides and enhances emotional support.

Material Support

In the area of material support financial issues were
of primary concern, being mentioned by 10 of the 12
students interviewed. While finances were an issue among
men, it was a much more pressing issue among women
especially those who are single mothers. Their financial
need coupled with family responsibilities created added
stress for the single mother since the main forms of aid
available are TAships and RAships which are a further drain
on her time. The plight of the single mother is further
exacerbated by the fact that the disciplines that are most
endowed with fellowships and scholarships have the lowest
percentage participation by women. Thus women find
themselves in those disciplines where the primary financial
supports offered are TAships and RAships.

Of the 12 students interviewed 9 worked as teaching
assistants and/or research assistants and often held other
part-time positions. The remaining 3 worked full-time
during their study at Simon Fraser. Those students who
worked as teaching assistants and research assistants
described the following aspects of their experience:
(1) Teaching assistantships and research assistantships
tend to interfere with their progress and lengthen the time
that they must spend in the program by diverting their
energy and time from their scholarly activities. (2) The
time demands of the teaching assistantships and research
assistantships interfere with the socializing and

conference and symposium attendance required for social and intellectual integration into the department. These reported experiences run counter to Girves and Wemmerus's (1988) contention that working as teaching or research assistants aids students in integrating into the department. (3) These positions are low paying and often the actual hours worked are greater than the formal contracted hours. The research assistants are particularly vulnerable in that they are not unionized and have no protection against being exploited. There is little job security from semester to semester in that the number of teaching assistantships will vary widely and the existence of a given research assistantship is totally contingent on a professor being given a grant to fund that position. (4) At semester end the work load for both the teaching assistantships and course work peaks. This creates a role conflict and takes its physical and emotional toll. (5) While in many cases teaching assistants enjoy their interaction with their students and in some cases research assistants enjoy the experience of the research assistantship, both find that these positions neither contribute to their thesis or course work nor enhance their research capabilities. Interestingly, despite the close interaction between the student and the faculty member for whom they work (often also their thesis supervisor), teaching assistantships and research assistantships do not

increase the emotional and intellectual support offered to the student in completing their thesis/project.

Available fellowships and scholarships are used to reward full-time students who have the luxury of time to concentrate on their studies sufficiently to gain top marks. Thus local students who do not have the financial resources to devote their time solely to their studies are forced to take on teaching assistantships and research assistantships in order to support themselves and their families. This further reduces the time they have to devote to their studies and their chances of earning a scholarship and has the added effect of leaving them marginalized. For example, working students have less time to take advantage of colloquiums and symposiums or to socialize with professors and fellow students thus reducing their integration within the department. Furthermore, their lack of time to devote to their studies may result in lower grades. As a result they may be perceived by faculty as being either poor students or not serious, a perception that may already have been established as a result of a lack of participation in the department's social and intellectual life. Once this judgement has been made faculty may lose interest in both the student's research topic and the student's progress, and focus their attention on the "golden boys and girls" perceived to have scholarly promise.

Another aspect of physical support frequently mentioned is the lack of flexibility in taking into account the life situations of the individual students (i.e.: work, family and domestic responsibilities). Sadly the people who most need flexibility are least likely to get it whereas those who do not need it are more likely to receive it. For example, Betty was unable to defer a course to another semester for family reasons while on the other hand a woman receiving close mentorship in Joseph's department was exempted from going through the ordinary channels to complete her degree even though it would have been perfectly reasonable for her to do so. The general lack of flexibility often takes an emotional toll. The student feels like an outsider because he or she does not fit into the departmental mold. Mature students are the ones who often find themselves in this position due to their life situation.

Another common complaint is that professors do not place value on the mature student's time. Students are mistreated when professors forget meetings, cancel without notice, allow interruptions, or allow only minimal time for these meetings, all of which ignores the mature student's other pressing time commitments.

> You make an appointment to see somebody and
> you get there and wait for him for two hours...
> or you get in there and there's this constant
> stream of students in and out... They take
> phone calls ... He says, 'Well I've got 5
> minutes,' and you're often interrupted in
> those five minutes too... and you've driven

from your office which is 30 miles away.
(Martin)

Emotional Support

Departments are geared toward the younger student and
expect that students have minimal outside interests
competing for their energies whereas the reality of the
demographics in graduate school is that a majority of the
students are mature students. These are students who often
have families and careers competing for their energy,
students who have different sets of expectations and needs
than the younger students and it is these students who
often find the support offered by the department wanting.

> As a master's student, you're on a different
> life cycle than you are as an undergraduate.
> As an undergraduate all you're doing is
> studying... As a graduate student often you've
> got a family, you've got a mortgage, all these
> other expectations. You're not just a student.
> And you have to divide your attention between
> all these different things. (Elizabeth)

A classic example of the lack of support and caring is
the departmental indifference to the experiences students
bring into the program. Most mature graduate students
enter their program with the full expectation that their
life's experiences will be respected and drawn upon by the
faculty and fellow students. This expectation is
especially prevalent among students who have worked in
their field of study. What they find, however, is that the
intellectual focus is on abstract theoretical knowledge
quite removed from real world knowledge and issues. Thus
they find that their experiences and practical knowledge

are received with indifference, viewed as irrelevant and occasionally with overt disdain.

> It should be an exciting place... First of all [names discipline] is an area that's got something to speak about but they don't exploit that at all... There wasn't a lot of interest in what I brought to the program and I didn't see a lot of interest on many other people's part in what other people may have been bringing either. (Martin)

> [There was] no flexibility for me to teach [in the capacity of a teaching assistant] what I would have thought was important in the course or to approach the subject matter... And this was particularly degrading because I am an experienced teacher... I didn't like being treated like a go-fer... I felt like I was treated like a brainless robot. (Betty)

Faced with this reaction some mature students start questioning the relevancy of the program to their own intellectual and vocational needs and become cynical and embittered.

> I can remember being so angry one day and saying, 'Here we are sitting and we're talking about these lofty theories of political systems. What we never talk about here is [the real world]. What we never talk about in [names discipline] is the fact that there are very real people out there in the very real world doing really horrible things to other real people. We never talk about that.' And basically what I did was spend a lot of time learning about and thinking about [Marxism]... What relevance does it have?

> [Names discipline] is like literature. And the suggestion that [names discipline] had to be relevant, that we could learn something that would matter today was to him [supervisor] a taint... It's so rarefied! It doesn't touch 99% of the citizens, right? So what's the point?

This perceived lack of relevancy prevents some students from intellectually integrating into the department and may leave them isolated and alienated.

Graduate school possesses a culture that is very distinct from the culture of the working world and of family life. Sadly, most departments neither acknowledge this fact nor provide assistance in the socialization of the students into this new culture. Therefore some of the students experience varying degrees of "culture shock". The practical implications of this is that students have little idea of what is expected of them and what they can expect in return from the department and the faculty members which leads to feelings of insecurity and confusion. The difficulty of adjusting to this new culture is compounded by the time constraints placed upon the students. It is a matter of rapidly learning how to swim before drowning.

> I found it a struggle in a lot of ways
> because you're not really sure what
> you're supposed to be doing. It creates
> a lot of confusion. (Andre)

> It is an endurance test. At the beginning I
> thought this was supposed to be some sort of
> stimulating environment, interesting thoughts
> and ideas. But it's not. It's... bang your
> head against the wall and just do it.
> (Elizabeth)

The psychological impact of this environment may be debilitating to the student or at the very least generate a level of stress and self-doubt which is counter productive to their intellectual endeavors.

A further complication is that graduate school culture is not homogeneous. Rather, it is separated into two distinct words - the world of course work and the world of

the thesis/project. Students suffer the added shock of
having to adapt to a new world at a point where they have
just adapted to the old world, therefore having to start
the process over again. Again, this transition is not
acknowledged by the department thus leaving students in
bewildered isolation wondering if it is only they who are
having difficulty with this transition. Thus students may
be retraumatized and suffer further deterioration of their
self confidence.

> What's a thesis? I didn't even know what a
> bloody thesis was. How do you write a thesis?
> What's expected of you? (Andre)

> I felt, well, everybody seems to be okay. What's
> wrong with me? But then I found out two years
> later things were not that great. People were
> not doing that well... People weren't talking
> about it. They didn't want anybody to know that
> maybe they were having problems because they
> thought that they should be able to deal with it
> themselves. You're in a graduate program and
> should be able to do this work. I think that
> was not an uncommon feeling in the department.
> (Elizabeth)

In the course of their adaptation to the department
students may be confronted with the fact that their needs
and priorities are in conflict with those of the
department. The department is often structured such that a
single minded devotion to the program and to the department
seems essential.

> Accommodation is expected to go only in
> one direction. You make yourself fit into
> here or good-bye. (Betty)

It is often the case that the program is only one of many
priorities students have and may not be their highest
priority. For example, the single mother often suffers

from the added stress of role conflict which may put her in
an untenable position of having to make a difficult choice
between her family and her studies.

> I felt that my daughter had suffered for it.
> She was sick all the time. I wasn't there...
> I was gone the entire day not getting home
> until 6:15 - 6:30 and she had problems with
> school for the first time in her life... And
> she was phoning me up at SFU. 'When are you
> going to be home?' So there was that sort of
> emotional pressure... I should have walked
> out at the beginning. (Betty)

Role conflict can also be experienced by those students who
are engaged in work which competes for their time and
intellectual energy.

> It was a neat course... and then all of a
> sudden I had to go on two different trips
> [work related]. And here I had the course
> I wanted, the schedule I wanted [and] it
> competed with work... And then I said,
> 'Forget this. I can't do that anymore.' ...
> I could have made it financially without
> [the job] but both sides of the fence were
> so exciting! (Craig)

In some cases, often with women, family, work and
studies compete for the student's time and energy.

> We were constantly told by the professors
> that we were the cream of the crop, that
> we needed to make this the priority, the
> most important thing... So it was very
> competitive. You had to work really hard.
> And then on top of that... I averaged maybe
> 30 hours a week preparing and reading and
> all the things you do when you TA. Still
> short of money... I worked on call evenings
> or weekends...
> (Gwendolyn - single mother of 2)

The stress of trying to balance the demands of the
various roles often adversely impacts the family
relationships. For example, the primary relationship is
often placed under great strain resulting in a high

incidence of divorce and break up (Gilbert, 1982). It goes without saying that the children (if any) are also impacted. Coping with the demands of study on the one hand, and family responsibility on the other, can leave the student feeling guilty or resentful or both (as was the case with Gwendolyn, Betty, and Martin). At the very least, it places extra strain on the student's physical, emotional and intellectual resources.

Not only do some departments fail to acknowledge student role conflicts but aggravate the problem by eliminating part-time status and/or pressuring the students to complete the degree in less than the five years that the formal regulations allow, as was the case with Gwendolyn. While the departments with some justification feel that by helping students maintain momentum they are reducing the amount of stress and uncertainty that the student suffers, the fact is that without providing the appropriate structure and guidance in the thesis phase, this attempt at maintaining momentum has the opposite effect to what is intended. Elizabeth is a prime example of a student whose family responsibilities coupled with the lack of supervisory support and guidance caused her to flounder in the thesis phase of her studies.

Academic Support

The majority of students enter graduate school with the expectation that they are going to find a high level of

academic support and a climate conducive to intellectual growth and development. But often what they find is very little infrastructure in place for the provision of academic and intellectual support. This lack of infrastructure can be found at both the departmental level and the supervisory committee level.

In the majority of departments there are no credit or non-credit courses that deal specifically with developing a proposal and writing the thesis. In the following quote it may appear that Joan is speaking about students in general but her statements mirror her own learning needs.

> I recommended through our graduate student group that they make the thesis proposal a course in itself... a course for research design and development... It really says something if students have no trouble going through half a dozen courses lickity split one after the other and then when they reach their thesis, they run into problems. That says somehow they don't have the skills... There just seemed to be an inconsistency on the part of the faculty there with their graduate students... There seemed to be that kind of presumption and yet, I don't think any one of us would profess... I have lots of research experience... but I think that the whole program would benefit from a methodology course. (Joan)

Students are expected to possess the ability to develop and write a thesis/project. The assumption that students already possess these abilities leads them to question their own competency, eroding their self-confidence and deterring them from seeking the help that they need.

Of those departments that offer methodology courses, these courses are often too limited in scope or irrelevant to students' needs. For example, a methodology course

built around multivariate analysis is irrelevant to a student contemplating research involving qualitative analysis. Furthermore, while a course on multivariate analysis provides in depth knowledge in those techniques, it is limited in the sense that it does not provide the other skills needed to perform research and write up the results.

The methodology courses offered tend to focus on data analysis and spend little or no time discussing topics such as finding an appropriate thesis topic, conceptualization, operationalization, performing the literature review and discussion of the results as well as the mechanics of writing both the proposal and the thesis.

A similar phenomenon can be found in the other course offerings that are made. Students often reported these courses to be too limited in that the focus is on the research of the particular professor teaching it. Other courses are described as irrelevant, boring, poorly conceptualized or rushed. In some cases the courses that students want are not offered or are offered at inconvenient times. The end result is that the course work has ill-prepared the students for the thesis itself.

Many students find themselves disappointed with their graduate courses for these reasons. In many cases this disappointment leads to a cynicism and a loss of interest in the program. The courses themselves have heavy

requirements and may leave students exhausted by the time
they are ready to embark on their thesis/project.

> I could hardly get through the courses. I did
> okay but the courses were just something you
> had to do and they didn't help me one bit in
> my research... I felt I'm never going to get
> through. I didn't have a good feeling about
> the courses but how am I going to get through
> the paper [thesis]? (Elizabeth)

Intellectual Support

Upon embarking on their thesis/project, students come
to depend primarily on their supervisory committee for
intellectual support. At Simon Fraser University this
generally means the support of the senior supervisor. The
presence or lack of this intellectual support directly
affects the emotional support that the student derives from
the committee since the two are intertwined.

> I think in retrospect I might have been better
> off if I'd had from my supervisor more pressure,
> assistance, encouragement... I wish she had been
> more specific, or had guided me more... But I
> felt though she was approachable that I still
> felt like I was drowning in all this stuff.
> (Jessica)

For the most part, students expect their association
with their supervisor to be a student - mentor relationship
where the student receives guidance on how to conceive and
complete a thesis/project and in general to be socialized
into the discipline - i.e.: What does it mean to be an
historian or a philosopher? However, the supervisors of
the students in this study generally perceived their role
to be limited to reading and critiquing students' written
submissions.

> She wanted to see what was on paper. Write
> something up for me and let me see it... Let
> me see what you've got. (Elizabeth)

In addition, students were expected to contact their

supervisor only when they had a problem that needed to be

solved. This generated an atmosphere of negativity around

the relationship which did not allow a positive rapport to

develop.

> And if I had any trouble then I was supposed
> to meet with him... That was very difficult for
> me to do because of the points that I alluded to
> earlier about being a person who is supposed to
> be good enough to be able to handle this on their
> own and any advice or any meeting that I had with
> my supervisor I felt was an admission of weakness.
> (Andre)

> One of the sad facts of contemporary graduate

education is that it is difficult for faculty members, even

if they wish to provide close mentorship to do so because

of their other commitments.

> A distinguishing characteristic of graduate
> education has been an intense and direct
> interaction between faculty and student in a
> complex and evolving relationship leading to more
> independent thought on the part of the student.
> As greater demands are made on the time of faculty
> to deal with a variety of issues and larger and
> larger numbers of students, this relationship can
> be compromised and if it is, graduate education
> will suffer. (Lapidus, 1989, p.14)

In many cases this relationship has been compromised, which

is not surprising since supervision counts for little in

faculty career advancement. Faced with increasing demands

on their time, including their own research, administrative

activities, teaching, and other career-related demands they

have less time available for the ever-increasing number of

students that they supervise.

> I never quit hearing about how busy he

> [supervisor] was. I didn't give a damn
> how busy he was! That's his problem.
> If he's too busy then he fights it out
> with his supervisors. Don't dump it on me!
> And that's all I ever heard, how busy he
> and how busy the faculty, how busy they all
> were up there and what the demands graduate
> students put on them were... It was frustrating.
> They got all sorts of money out of me and I
> don't think I got nearly what I paid for out of
> them. My supervisor was an impediment to my
> progress. (Martin)

Having little time and energy to devote to each of

their students often results in the student perceiving that

the faculty member is not interested in either their topic

or in them. This perception is demoralizing and can reduce

the student's self-esteem.

> I got disillusioned because I... wanted
> someone to say, 'Hey, how's it going?...
> Why don't you try that?' Even if it's
> only casual conversation. But there was
> none of that going on... I worked with this
> person but if I wanted to talk about my
> work I had to wait outside her office
> during office hours. (Elizabeth)

Because of the tenuousness of the student/faculty

contact the faculty members often do not realize that one

of their students has withdrawn. Thus there is no

follow-up or debriefing of that student. This results in

one final blow to the student's self-esteem as they

perceive their value is so negligible that even their very

leaving goes unnoticed.

> Something else that has impacted me... is that
> I haven't heard from anybody... They don't
> even acknowledge that you're gone. They don't
> send you a letter saying, gee we're sorry you
> withdrew or fuck you or we're glad you're gone.
> It's like it didn't happen. (Gwendolyn)
>
> They can take you or leave you. One more
> completed thesis at Simon Fraser in [names
> discipline] doesn't matter a whole lot to

them I don't think.   It's neither here nor
there.   (Joseph)

Summary

The central theme in leavers' stories is a perceived
lack of support and caring at the departmental level and
the supervisory committee level. At the departmental level
lack of support and caring is manifested in the degree of
physical, emotional, academic and intellectual support
provided. At the supervisory committee level it is
manifested in a lack of supervisor availability, interest
and practical guidance particularly at the
conceptualization stage of thesis development.

The financial support provided by the departments
appears mainly in the form of teaching and research
assistantships with scholarships reserved for full-time
students with top marks. Thus the level of financial
support can best be summed as being inadequate and
unbalanced in that the students with the greatest need get
the least amount of support. In the other areas of
material support such as flexibility in accommodating
students' needs and time given to students, we see a
similar pattern. Here too the level of support provided is
inadequate and unbalanced. For example, when students have
the most need for advisory support during the
conceptualization stage of their thesis, they are expected
to proceed with minimal supervisory guidance.

The state of the emotional support provided to students reflects the intrinsic nature of bureaucracy in which procedures and regulations take precedence over the needs and circumstances of the individual. This is manifested in the following phenomena: The focus on set curricula results in an indifference towards the real world experiences of the students. Another area of difficulty relating to set curricula is that subject matter can be irrelevant to the needs of the individual student. Furthermore the system does not possess the flexibility to meet the needs and priorities of the individual student. The emotional consequences to the student may include feelings of helplessness, frustration, anger, alienation, and low self-esteem.

In general departments provide an inadequate level of academic support in that there are no courses or workshops that deal specifically with the development of a thesis. In addition, the existing course work is of little use to students embarking on their thesis - a problem of curriculum design as well as of support. The negative impact on the students of this lack of academic support is aggravated by the implicit and explicit message communicated to students. They are made to feel that they should know how to develop a thesis and that they have been taught everything they need to know. The attitude of the faculty seem to be that the capable students will succeed

and the weaker students will fail. This attitude is well described by Joseph:

> I hear again and again the kind of attitude
> that creeps through about a Darwinian
> natural selection among students. The good
> ones, you'll find them. You don't have to
> go looking for them. You don't have to go
> out and be a good teacher... Some will make
> it to the top and some will fall back by the
> wayside... You don't have to go out and
> develop the little spark of light in your
> student's head. If they can't nurture
> themselves, if they can't find a way to
> build up their fire or they're just weak
> students without the fuel to make the
> fire burn bright... [it's not the professor's
> responsibility to show them the way].

This attitude has an adverse emotional impact on students in that if they are struggling with their thesis their self-esteem is attacked. It then becomes shaming to ask for help or even to hand in their existing work for evaluation. The assumption that they "should know" can lead them to suffer in demoralized silence.

One of the most overriding factors about the student -supervisor relationship is the clash of expectations held by both parties. While the student expects a student-mentor relationship the supervisor in most cases expects only to read and critique written submissions. This gap between the student's expectations and that of the supervisor is aggravated by the role conflict from which the supervisor suffers. Those roles that are beneficial to the supervisor's career such as researcher or administrator take precedence over the role of supervisor which has little impact on the faculty member's career. The effect

on the student is that they perceive that the faculty
member has little or no interest in their topic or in their
progress. Again this is a source of demoralization and
loss of self-esteem.

How do these experiences specifically affect the
students' decision to leave? It is apparent that in most
cases it is the combined impact of some or all of these
experiences which conspire to make graduate studies
untenable for the student. As the impact of these
experiences mount over the course of study, the student
slowly comes to the realization that the cost of
continuance outweighs the benefits of completion or in
other cases the student runs out of financial,
intellectual, emotional and temporal resources. Thus, the
student feels forced by these circumstances to come to the
decision to leave.

What impact does leaving itself have on these
students? While the process of withdrawal may occasionally
represent a positive action (i.e.: the taking up of a
desired career opportunity or the realization of
alternative ways for self development and growth) in this
study it was found to represent a negative and painful
experience. For most students leaving represents a loss
and a personal failure. At the very least leaving
represents the loss of money, time, and effort and of
former expectations held by the student. At the extreme it
is the loss of a dream - frustrated ambitions and

unfulfilled goals. Among the students interviewed it appears that the more time and energy invested in the program the greater the sense of failure and diminishment of self-esteem. Leaving is accompanied by feelings of frustration, pain, humiliation and depression.

Society judges success and failure by the accomplishment of tangible goals. Since we are social beings our experience is shaped by how society interprets that experience. Our society is success oriented and status oriented. Leaving represents a potential loss of status, social opportunities as well as employment opportunities. Most of the leavers stated that they had never quit anything before in their lives. In our competitive society where success is narrowly defined, it is easy to understand the negative impact of leaving to the self-esteem of former master's students.

Chapter VI

Discussion

This final chapter is divided into three sections:
first, the various foreshadowed explanations in Chapter II
are examined in light of the findings of this study;
second, the literature on support and caring is addressed;
and finally, implications and recommendations are
elaborated.

Foreshadowed Explanations

Girves and Wemmerus' (1988) model though necessary and
useful as a starting point in promoting thought about
graduate leaving is nevertheless static and barren. While
it accounts for 29% of the variance, a high figure when
compared to undergraduate models of attrition, there
remains a great deal not accounted for.

The findings of this study confirm the general
indicator that faculty/student relationships are critical
to degree progress. Whereas the Girves and Wemmerus model
does not elaborate what the important ingredients in this
relationship are, the findings of this study indicate that
various elements of faculty support and caring are central
to degree completion. The early leaver's decision to
withdraw is based on the extent to which departmental
support and caring at an intellectual, academic, emotional

and physical level meet his or her needs and expectations.
Leavers in the thesis/project phase of their studies
repeatedly reiterate the importance of supervisor
accessibility, interest, and practical assistance to their
successful completion of the program.

> I feel if I had better supervision and
> not somebody doing the job for me, but just
> somebody who was interested and was willing
> to help me get started, get me pointed in
> the right direction, that I would have
> written my thesis. (Martin)

Disconfirmed in this study is Girves and Wemmerus'
contention that TAships and RAships assist students to
become involved and thus complete their programs. Nine of
the 12 leavers interviewed held TAships and/or RAships.
While these positions afforded economic assistance, none of
the 9 leavers saw them as an asset toward degree
completion. In fact, these appointments added pressure and
distracted students from their studies.

The Girves and Wemmerus model tries to account for
leaving in terms of departmental differences.
Unfortunately none of the leavers in this study came from
the applied or natural sciences. (I was only successful in
getting one 20 minute telephone interview with a male
science student.) Therefore, the striking similarity in
the themes that emerged across departments and disciplines
may not be borne out had science students participated in
this study. This lack of notable differences in the
general themes that emerged is similar to the findings in
Rudd's (1985) study. I can only conclude that those

elements which encourage leaving are more prevalent in high attrition departments than low attrition departments.

The "push-pull" model (Woodley and Parlet, 1983) is useful in describing the complexity and variation in the individual circumstances that surround leaving. The stories of the leavers in this study are unique and yet, clearly, leavers focus primarily on the student/department and student/supervisor relationship as central to the decision to leave. For example, all of the 8 late leavers in this study report that despite other stressors such as health and financial problems, family responsibilities and work demands, the key factor in their decision to leave is embedded in their relationship with their supervisor/committee.

> If I had the opportunity to choose a
> different faculty member [as supervisor],
> I would have finished. Surely! Or if they'd
> assigned somebody who was even more demanding
> but more approachable and given me some
> direction, I would have finished. I'm a
> finisher. No, I'm a digger. I'm a mole. I
> chew until I pop up some place else in the yard.
> I don't mind that... (Philip)

Sternberg's (1981) description of the thesis process as a lonely endeavor for which the student feels unprepared and during which he or she receives "lukewarm" assistance from the faculty is entirely in keeping with the stories of the leavers in this study.

> They don't help you... It's like they expect
> you to be able to just do it. (Elizabeth)

> It's an extremely lonely process... (Andre)

The Rennie & Brewer (1987) model of thesis blocking
neglects to address the context in which students' problems
occur. There seems to be a "blame the student" flavor to
this model. The late leavers in this study contended with
numerous difficulties in soliciting the help and
cooperation of their supervisors. Perhaps students who
"gain control" over their thesis do not have supervisors as
unapproachable as Martin's or unavailable and abusive as
Joan's or as preoccupied and indifferent as Philip's or
Jessica's, which effectively "blocked" progress for these
students.

> She made some comment about being happy to work
> with me knowing that I wouldn't be a dragger...
> That I was basically a self initiating type and
> she wouldn't have to hold my hand... For some
> reason that really stuck with me.   (Jessica)

There is no evidence from these leavers' stories that they
were unmotivated, "dilatory" or incompetent as this model
and Rudd's (1985; 1986) analyses seem to imply. To the
contrary, these leavers displayed exceptional ability and
tenacity. As Martin stated, "The other half of the
equation [meaning the cooperation of his supervisor] wasn't
there."

Zuber-Skerritt & Knight (1985; 1986) address the issue
of student "incompetence" or "lack of talent" in conducting
research from a different perspective. They suggest that
as inexperienced researchers, master's students must be
taught formal research and writing skills and given
appropriate support through workshops with both students

and supervisors present. The findings of this study
corroborate this perspective in that leavers found their
course work, including methodology courses (when offered)
to be irrelevant to the task of thesis writing and thus
were ill prepared. The lack of appropriate methodology
courses, concrete support from supervisors and the lack of
any mechanism to bring students together to discuss their
thesis or process left leavers in intellectual isolation
leading eventually to withdrawal as Zuber-Skerritt & Knight
predicted.

> I would make an appointment with her and she'd
> be unable to meet with me for like six weeks.
> This is quite routine... They [committee members]
> just said, "Bring me your proposal." And part of
> my problem is that I'm just a real perfectionist
> and so I kept rehashing this design and... it just
> never progressed. But I thought that was perhaps
> not the most productive approach to say, "Write up
> a proposal. Bring it to me," when the research
> design is perhaps the most significant part of the
> thesis where you need advisory support. (Joan)

In their classic work, Katz & Hartnett (1976) describe
the American Ph.D. experience from the student's
perspective. There is a remarkable similarity between the
expectations and experiences of these students and those of
this study. The factors which created disillusionment
sixteen years ago appear to be the same today. For
example, the inadequate information that students receive
about their prospective department can cause leaving as in
Sarah's and Gwendolyn's case. Gwendolyn was led to believe
that with a 4.0 GPA in her undergraduate degree she would
be eligible for a scholarship. Once she began her graduate

program, it became clear to her that scholarships were
reserved for foreign students and that the financial
support her professors had promised was in the form of
teaching assistantships.   This left her in an untenable
position;

>   It felt like I was standing on the end of the
>   wharf and that I jumped into the water and that
>   the wharf had collapsed behind me. So, I either
>   had to be able to tread water or I was going to
>   drown because I couldn't get back on the wharf...
>   I had quit my job to go to school. I was
>   disillusioned. (Gwendolyn)

Certain researchers (Ibrahim, McEvan & Pitblado, 1980;
Rudd, 1985) suggest that rising noncompletion rates may be
connected to rising standards of performance. Clearly, the
thesis is an intimidating requirement. This is partly due
to the lack of clear supervisory or departmental
guidelines. For example, Craig who "used to write every
day and has been published half a dozen times" believed
that his writing skills were not at the graduate level.
Andre who knew he could " write a good piece" found that
when it came to writing his thesis everything came out as
"gibberish". The thesis is the largest work that most
master's students have ever undertaken. The knowledge that
it must be defended before a committee, and will be bound
and made available to the public adds to the anxiety of
producing a thesis. Therefore, it becomes imperative that
supervisory support make this "mammoth" task doable in the
eyes of students. For example, Joseph, who had a very

ambitious thesis topic, was not given adequate guidance in choosing an appropriate topic or what was expected of him.

> I don't think they [members of his committee]
> ever grasped what I was trying to do... [They
> needed to say:] 'Look, this isn't something you
> do in a 100 page master's, okay?'... I was getting
> guidance in the form of nudges... This is where I
> think a mentor relationship was the thing I needed
> - somebody with the wisdom and the depth of
> character or whatever it takes... They just
> weren't really there as people for me. (Joseph)

While leavers were able to express various

dissatisfactions and unmet needs in their graduate

experience, they also seemed apologetic, embarrassed or

unsure about whether their perspective is correct. In the

end, many leavers attributed their noncompletion to their

personal inadequacies - the idea that there are many

students who do complete, so what is wrong with me?

> I never could figure out whether some of the
> feelings I had about being isolated, not getting
> a lot of support was because I was too needy...
> I should be able to cope with this and if it's
> not working real well then it's because I was at
> fault. I wasn't organized enough. I was
> inadequate in some way. (Gwendolyn)

> Maybe I failed because... Maybe they (colleagues)
> lined themselves up to what they needed and maybe
> I didn't. (Philip)

> I wondered if it was because I was older and I was
> married and I had a young family and if my interests
> were different. (Martin)

> I felt, well, everybody seems to be okay. What's
> wrong with me?... I don't really think that I
> wanted to be led around by the hand either.
> (Elizabeth)

The academic milieu presents an image of infallibility.

Thus students take responsibility for their problems which

actually may be due to systemic causes. The attributions

of these former students prevented them from being more

assertive and otherwise proactive which may have

contributed to their leaving.

> I was too willing to accept things the way they
> were. Instead of saying, 'This is a pile of
> rubbish! I want a new supervisor... I don't
> like what's going on here... This isn't good
> enough,'... I wasn't assertive enough in making
> demands... because I'd been intimidated, I
> suppose. (Elizabeth)

Quite often the student/department and

student/supervisor relationships serve as a battle ground

where a clash of expectations occurs. It is apparent from

the interviews that this clash of expectations is all too

common for these leavers who may be described as the

"differentiated responsible adults" defined by Kuh & Thomas

(1983), whose needs and expectations are not met in the

academic milieu. For example, leavers who are parents find

parenting and graduate school incompatible. Thus, a

climate conducive to disappointment and conflict is

created. The power differential and the aura of

infallibility projected by academia results in students

accepting responsibility for not fitting in and accepting

the status quo.

Support and Caring

> The primary aim of every educational institution
> and of every educational effort must be the
> maintenance and enhancement of caring... To act
> as one-caring... is to act with special regard
> for the particular person in a concrete way.
> (Noddings, 1984, p. 172, 24)

Lest the reader conclude that "caring" refers to an affect reserved for those we love, let me emphasize that caring in the educational context is serious business that must be substantiated in concrete ways. Caring is not optional nor is it reserved for certain personalities who find it natural to reach out to others. Caring is not based on friendliness, liking, or going out of ones way, (although these may be present). Caring is the ethical duty of educators to behave toward their students in ways that let them know they are important. It refers to a particular mind set and values that clearly indicate that students and their intellectual endeavors are a priority. To be caring, then, is to be responsive to the problems, needs and expectations of students.

What are the outward manifestations of caring? The participants in this study delineate the kinds of caring that were missing and that would have made it possible for them to complete their studies - these are described as physical, emotional, academic and intellectual support.

For educators to care, to be responsive, they must understand the needs and reality of master's students. In terms of academic and intellectual support, some late leavers stories suggest that anything that would have broken the pattern of isolation would have been helpful. As they became more burned out, they became more isolated and less apt to seek feedback or put themselves in situations or create situations where they were going to be

with other people with their project. In addition, leavers became increasingly isolated as they became more ashamed and as they felt inadequate. There was the idea, the expectation of being competent and very able. This created a block or barrier to finding out about the thesis/project because students expected to be competent, they expected to know and there is a piece missing which is the learning about how to do it. Thus, they get immobilized by their own expectations of themselves and their inability to meet those expectations. What is needed and most lacking is very concrete assistance. For each student the type of assistance required is different. However, a simple note or telephone call initiated by the supervisor in which he or she offers positive support may be enough to encourage the student and open the way to resolving the particular difficulty the student is experiencing. To care by demonstrating availability and a willingness to give sets a tone that frees the student to initiate conversation and suggest areas of interest or difficulties.

An essential theme in the stories of leavers is a perceived lack of interest on the part of their supervisors. Leavers wanted caring to be demonstrated through meaningful interaction - i.e.: the setting of realistic guidelines and expectations, sharing ideas, receiving concrete suggestions and prompt direct feedback, all of which encourage and inspire the student. A supervisor who expresses interest in these ways is an

active motivator. Students are not left to work in a
vacuum, in emotional and intellectual isolation. For
example, when we consider Jessica's story, and her project
that became so big it became a monster she had to slay, it
would have been vital that somebody made sure it did not
grow that big. Another example is Philip whose supervisor
became inaccessible and to his mind disinterested.

> Just give me some guidance. Say, 'This is
> what you need to do.' ... Any kind of support,
> any kind of guidance [and] I would have
> finished it... There wasn't that guidance at
> a key point... I expected my advisors were
> going to advise me and that didn't happen to
> my way of thinking.

Numerous leavers indicated a need for academic
support. For example, Philip stated: "Maybe I'm just not
politically aware... I don't know what the rules of this
game are." It would have been important for his senior
supervisor to let him know appropriate protocol. If Philip
had been advised to meet with his second advisor to discuss
his methodology at the beginning of his study, he would not
have faced the particular problem he encountered. Sarah
and Gwendolyn's experiences also indicate that they needed
academic support in the form of accurate information.
Sarah was led to believe that she was a suitable candidate
for her program. Gwendolyn was led to believe that she
would receive financial assistance. The inadequate and
inaccurate information they received had grave
consequences. In addition, Gwendolyn had every right to
take longer than two years to complete her program without

experiencing strong pressure to do so. She needed to know what to do and where to go to get her difficulties resolved with her committee and department.

One aspect of emotional support that all leavers reported missing was a proper regard, a sensitivity and respect for them and their life situation. Betty is a prime example. Her needs as a single mother were ignored in her small "feminist" department. The acknowledgment of her situation and her needs from even one person made a difference:

> The person who really got me through was the secretary of the department who was the nicest person. She was a mother herself, a working mother who really had an understanding of what was going on. I probably would have quit the first term if it wasn't for her.

Simon Fraser University is geared toward older, mature students and so it is especially alarming to hear that these students find themselves treated in disrespectful ways. Philip's outrage at the less than professional treatment he received is typical of the leavers in this study. (Recall that Philip's supervisor did not contact him after their one and only conversation over the telephone and that he did not answer Philip's messages.)

> In my work, if I get a message to phone somebody, I phone them, and I phone them that day. And as far as I'm concerned I should be able to expect that same kind of [courtesy]... I think that's a professional relationship. I think that a university teacher should exhibit that. [Names supervisor] didn't... If I'm a student, especially at that level, and I ask him to take on a fairly major responsibility and he's agreed to do it, I think he bloody well owes me that courtesy. I shouldn't ask for it. I should expect to receive

it. I should expect to receive it in some timely fashion.

Some writers have likened the university system to the power hierarchy found in the feudal system with students treated as serfs of old. This seems somewhat harsh, yet in the case of TAs and RAs there appears to be a dynamic where their interest is in the topic of the course or professor's research but there is little room or opportunity to focus on their own project. For example, Elizabeth who worked as a research assistant for her supervisor had to "wait outside her office during office hours" to discuss her thesis work. As a final example, Joan's experience in which she was obviously abused by her supervisor illustrates how difficult being in a "one down" position with a supervisor can be.

Physical support in terms of financial aid was a problem for most leavers in this study.

> I feel really bitter about the money. I'm
> angry that there's not more of it available.
> (Gwendolyn)

The hardship that working students face impacts the quality of the learning experience itself. It is important that educators realize the demands and stresses many mature students face due to financial difficulties. Part of caring is the provision of adequate financial support so that students do not experience the added stress of poverty.

The perceived lack of support and caring reported by the master's leavers in this study is also reported in a

different context - by high school leavers. In a recent

issue of "The Harvard Education Letter" (September/October,

1990) in which three studies of at-risk high school

students and leavers were reviewed, it was observed:

> In explaining why they leave school, most
> dropouts offer, among many reasons, one clear
> and simple statement about their relationship
> to the school: 'Nobody really cared.' Conversely,
> asked to name the single most important feature
> characterizing a good school most parents and
> students will say: 'Teachers who care.'...
> Students need and want teachers who care about
> them personally and who can convey respect for
> their capabilities - as students and as future
> workers and citizens. (p. 3)

Farrell (1990) noted that when teachers care about

high school students, when they see them as individuals,

then boredom and pressure, steps that lead to dropping out,

are alleviated. Students find classes interesting when

teachers displayed sympathetic characteristics and a

nonjudgmental manner. This finding is corroborated in

Richard's (1987) study in which low-achieving high school

students describe what motivates them to learn by focusing

on the process - how they are taught. They appreciate

teachers who are both knowledgeable and caring. Finally,

Dillon (1989) investigated how one high school teacher

created an open "risk-free" environment for low achieving

high school students. It was observed that the teacher

built relationships with his students who appreciated his

positive, open and respectful attitude. Judgmental

routines disliked by students in both Farrell's and

Richard's studies were absent in this classroom.

In conclusion, then, if educators at Simon Fraser University are to adopt a caring ethic they must ask: "How would it feel to be a master's student?" and act accordingly on behalf of the student. This implies that caring behavior is not conditioned by narrow and rigidly defined principles but by:

> ... a broad and loosely defined ethic that molds itself in situations and has a proper regard for human affections, weaknesses and anxieties. (Noddings, 1984, p. 25)

Central to a caring ethic is an understanding of the needs of graduate students and the kinds of supports that may be appropriate.

Elizabeth came to an important understanding during our conversation. She realized that perhaps her need for caring was a legitimate one, that just because she had considerable experience as a researcher did not mean she should be able to "do it on my own".

> They're [professors for whom she has worked as a research assistant] pretty insecure. They want you to care about the work that they're doing. They want lots of feedback and positive reinforcement. So why shouldn't the students? Why should the students not have the same kind of environment?

Implications

Further research. My study is a study of grief and loss. Part of what I saw in my interviews was the process of grieving. Most of the participants were in the early stages of grief, denial being the first stage. I assisted

them in initiating that process by helping them get in touch with their loss by recognizing the contextual factors and breaking the illusion of personal inadequacy. For example, Jessica wept at the end of our interview, in part, due to the realization that she had a right to more than she got. For recent leavers the full impact of their leaving and related losses are not yet fully identified and understood - for example, employment and income. It would be interesting to interview these same people one year from now to learn how their perspectives have changed.

Longitudinal studies in which students are followed through their programs and the evolution of their experience is mapped out are vital. How do the experiences of leavers and completers compare? What are the similarities and differences?

In order to address the clash of expectations between student and faculty, research should be conducted into the differing perceptions held by the student and his or her supervisor as to why the student left.

Policy and action. From the findings of this study it seems clear that Simon Fraser University needs to take a more comprehensive institutional stance toward a supportive and caring educational environment.

Since the quality of supervision is vitally important to the master's student's successful completion of his or her program, providing consciousness raising seminars regarding responsive, caring supervision for senior

supervisors would be an important step in this direction. In addition, since supervision plays a minor role in the careers of faculty members, a policy giving supervision higher status needs to be implemented. Presently, some professors supervise few or no students while others supervise many. While some help a high ratio of their students to successfully complete their thesis/project, others do not. It would be valuable to have this information made public to both students and faculty. In addition, professors who supervise a larger number of students should have this credited as teaching time while those who supervise few students should teach extra courses. Furthermore, because supervision requires a great deal of time and hard work, supervisors should be rewarded in other ways. Successfully completed theses should count as publications for the senior supervisor. Faculty must be acknowledged and rewarded for this most important aspect of their work.

There is an attitude between the university and its students that cannot be tolerated. In this study, this attitude manifested itself in numerous ways ranging from a lack of sensitivity and accessibility and appropriate professional conduct to outright disrespectful and even abusive behaviors toward students. Students are in a relatively powerless position dependent upon the good will of professors. It appears that an effective evaluation and student feedback system needs to be implemented.

Presently, as a number of leavers noted, "evaluations are hardly worth the paper they're written on." Professors who demonstrate negative attitudes toward their students must be accountable - repeated offenders should not be allowed to enjoy the many benefits and privileges that come with their position.

Related to the above, the university's commitment and investment in the welfare and growth of students needs to be extended to students who leave their programs. Generally speaking, the leaving of master's students is not acknowledged by the university. It would seem imperative that the university put procedures in place to document a person's status and ensure that leaving is acknowledged thus assisting the former student to "complete" his or her experience with the university.

Because of the lack of academic support, students are left to believe that they should know how to conduct research and complete a thesis/project. It seems that there is no attention to the process of how one gets to the writing but a complete focus on the product, the necessity of completion. It is as if nothing is happening if there is not something on paper. To respond to these academic and intellectual needs, appropriate methodological courses much like those described by Zuber-Skerritt (1987) in which students complete their proposal in a supportive, nonthreatening environment need to be developed and offered to students. In addition, because there is generally no

mechanism for peers to get together to talk about their projects or process, it is vital that departments institutionalize ongoing, focused support groups to foster the "dynamic community of scholars" found missing and longed for by the former students in this study. (Thesis support groups are a common occurrence in the department of psychology, a low attrition department.)

At Simon Fraser University, low attrition departments are well-funded, full-time programs. This trend is coupled with the finding in this study that financial issues are a considerable burden for many former students. Therefore, despite the practical problems involved in making such a recommendation, it would seem highly beneficial if our university could sponsor students in such a way as to allow full-time studies for the first two years of study.

Students are not given sufficient information upon which to make a well informed choice about entering their prospective department. Information about the department needs to be thorough, giving students a true indication of what to expect. In addition it would be important that appropriate orientation of incoming master's students be institutionalized to avoid unnecessary stress, disappointment and leaving.

Finally, it appears that it is difficult for students to change supervisors. Though there is lip service that such a decision is open for the student to make if the working relationship is unproductive, in practise it is a

very delicate matter. Elizabeth, for example, explained that when she switched supervisors, her first supervisor would not acknowledge her for a year. This is an unnecessary stress for students and needs to be addressed through effective policy measures.

Conclusion

In this study I examined master's leavers' experiences viewed from the perspective of the leavers themselves. Many of the experiences contributing to student withdrawal are felt by many students who continue to remain in the university system. Therefore this study raises questions about how master's students should be treated in general. It raises questions regarding the student's experience of graduate studies, questions regarding educators' understanding of graduate student leaving and practical questions pertaining to what departments and educators ought "to be" in order to provide a supportive and caring environment conducive to students' learning and personal growth.

We must reflect on whether graduate departments are good environments for graduate students and how they can be made better environments. We must carefully consider our designs for students' learning. Furthermore, we must question the nature of the messages given to students and reflect especially upon how we might help students as they encounter the difficulties inherent in graduate studies.

In this final chapter I have written to educators who are interested in the quality of the education they provide to master's students. How might educators relate to and assist graduate students to learn? I believe that university educators have a fundamental responsibility for the learning and growth of their master's students.

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY MASTER'S STUDENT STUDY

_____, 1991

Dear _____:

My name is Marianne Yeatman. I am a master's student in the Faculty of Education (Counselling Psychology) at Simon Fraser University. For my thesis, I am currently conducting a study to determine (1) why master's students leave their studies before completing their degrees and (2) what this experience is like for those who leave.

The study I am conducting is of interest to the university and has been approved by the Simon Fraser University Ethics Committee. I am sending questionnaires to students who have discontinued graduate work over the past 3 semesters. Your name was entrusted to me by the graduate dean, Dr. Bruce Clayman. Your cooperation is most important to this study, and I would sincerely appreciate your taking time to respond to the questions involved.

As you may realize, graduate students represent the top 5% of the population academically. Yet, a large percentage of proven academically successful people do not complete their studies. Little is understood about master's students' experiences and what particular circumstances conspire against their graduate completion. Your participation in this study may benefit future enrolees in graduate studies to overcome barriers or difficulties you have faced by alerting them and the universities to those difficulties and taking steps to alleviate them.

Your experience as a graduate student is unique and personal, and is also invaluable in gaining a better understanding in general of graduate students' decisions to withdraw from their programs. I hope your participation in this study will also benefit you by providing you with an opportunity to review and further clarify your own experience.

Be assured that what you say will be treated in absolute confidence. Answers will not be read by anyone in your department. My final report will not identify individuals.

May I thank you in advance for your assistance and ask that you return the completed questionnaire as soon as possible.

Sincerely yours,

Marianne Yeatman

MASTER'S STUDENT STUDY

PART 1: STUDY IN YOUR GRADUATE DEPARTMENT

1. There are many factors which might lead a master's
student to discontinue his/her studies. In as much detail
as necessary, describe the occasion when you decided not to
re-register in your master's program. Thinking back, what
events led to your decision, how did they come about, what
did you do, with whom did you speak, had you been
considering this for a long time? (If necessary, please
use the back of this sheet to tell your story).

2. I am particularly interested in interviewing some people
in depth.

If you are willing, please indicate your telephone number
and a convenient time when I might call you _____

PART 2: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

I would like to know a little about you so I can see how
different types of people vary in their experience.

1. What is your name? _____

2. What is your sex? (CIRCLE ONE)

    1. Female

    2. Male

3. What was your marital status during the total period you
were working on your master's degree? (CIRCLE THE RESPONSE
THAT BEST REFLECTS YOUR STATUS)

    1. Married/common-law during the entire period.

    2. Married/common-law after started the master's
       program.

    3. Married/common-law but was widowed, separated
       or divorced during this period.

    4. Single during the entire period.

    5. Other. Specify: _____

4. How many children did you have while you were working
on your master's degree? _____ (NUMBER)

5. What was your age when you entered the program? (CHECK
ONE)

20-25	_____	46-50	_____
26-30	_____	51-55	_____
31-35	_____	56-60	_____
36-40	_____	61+	_____
41-45	_____		

6. (A) Is English your first language? (YES/NO)

   (B) Did you experience a lack of facility in English?
       (YES/NO) If so, was it a barrier to the
       completion of your degree? (YES/NO)

   (C) Did you experience cultural isolation? (YES/NO)

7. While working on your master's degree were you: (CIRCLE ONE)

   1. A full-time student -- i.e.: available to commit
      semester-length blocks of time purely to graduate
      studies.

   2. A part-time student -- i.e.: employed full-time or
      part-time and attended classes in the evenings.

   3. Other. Specify: _____

8. What is the name of the department and program in which
you studied? _____

9. How many semesters were you in the program? _____

10. How much of the program did you complete? (Indicate the
number of courses you completed and how long you worked on
your project/thesis, if applicable). _____

_____

11. What was your CGPA (grade point average)? _____

12. (a) In what field did you obtain your first degree?

_____

   (b) How many years are there between your first degree
and the commencement of your master's study? _____

   (c) What was your CGPA in your first degree? _____

I SINCERELY APPRECIATE YOUR HELP

I UNDERSTAND THAT I MAY OBTAIN RESULTS FROM MARIANNE YEATMAN, FACULTY OF EDUCATION, UPON COMPLETION OF THE PROJECT.

ANY COMPLAINTS I HAVE ABOUT THIS PROJECT MAY BE DIRECTED TO DR. PHIL WINNE, FACULTY OF EDUCATION, ASSOCIATE DEAN.

INTRODUCTION TO IN-DEPTH CONVERSATION WITH RESPONDENTS

Thank you for your time and cooperation in carrying out this research inquiry into the issues involved in master's students' decisions to withdraw from their studies. I am interested in learning more about your personal experience and your reflections on your experience regarding your graduate study at Simon Fraser University. I hope that by the end of our conversation I will have a sense of what leaving your graduate program was like for you.

During the interview, I will be taping what is said for later review. Be assured that what you say will be treated in absolute confidence. Your name will not be used in this study nor will you be identified in any way. I will now test the equipment. Do you have any questions, concerns or comments at this time? (Equipment test. Respond to initial questions, concerns or comments).

CONVERSATION

FIRST I'D LIKE TO KNOW ABOUT YOUR DECISION TO GO TO GRADUATE SCHOOL.
1. Casting your mind back, try to recall why you entered graduate studies.

Optional Probes:
   Did anything else influence the decision?
   With whom did you discuss it?
   Did you consider any alternatives?
   At what stage did you reach your decision?

How did you feel about your decision?
What was important to you about being a graduate student?

2. How did you decide on S.F.U. for your master's study?

3. In summary, thinking back to when you first definitely

decided to enroll in this department, what were your career

and educational plans at that time?

**LETS MOVE NOW TO SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT THE DEPARTMENT IN
WHICH YOU STUDIED.**

The department is a type of "home" to students.

1. How did you feel about your department?

Optional Probes:

   What was the general atmosphere like?
   What did it feel like for you to be a student in this
   department?
   Was there anything else that impressed you?
   Can you explain this a little more?
   What do you mean...?
   What about the course work? Quality of instruction?
   Faculty concern for research?
   How was your commitment to earning your degree
   influenced by your experiences in your department?

2. Were your colleagues satisfied? What were their sources

of satisfaction/dissatisfaction?

3. How would you describe the relationships between

graduate students and faculty?

Optional Probes:

   How did faculty tend to treat students?
   How accessible were faculty?

4. How would you describe your relationship with faculty?

Optional Probe:

   What kinds of interactions were or would have been most
   helpful?

5. How would you describe your relationship with fellow

students?

6. In what ways do you feel your department could have been more helpful to you?

How would you characterize the "ideal type" of department in which to get a master's degree? (Probe these questions to elicit full details.)

NOW, LET'S MOVE INTO ANOTHER AREA, THAT OF THE THESIS OR PROJECT REQUIREMENT OF THE MASTER'S DEGREE.

1. In my own experience and in the literature on Ph.D. attrition, problems with the research component seem to be a major stumbling block to completion. Is this true of your experience? Tell me about that. (Probe for complete details.)

2. How did you feel about your working relationship with your committee/supervisor?

Optional Probes:
  How helpful were they in facilitating your progress?
  What more could they have done to assist you?
  What kind of supervision would have been most helpful to you?

3. How did you try to overcome the problems you encountered with your committee/supervisor?

NOW I'D LIKE TO KNOW MORE ABOUT HOW YOU ARRIVED AT YOUR DECISION TO WITHDRAW FROM YOUR PROGRAM.

1. Does a moment stand out when you seriously began to think you would leave the program? (If so, ask the respondent to set up the scene and relate the images or pictures that come through his/her mind.)

Optional probes:
  What was your thinking?

What were you feeling?
What did you do exactly?

2. Talk about the things that bothered you or impressed

you.

Optional probes:

   Can you tell me more about ...?
   Were there any other issues involved in your decision?
   How did you handle the situation?
   What other actions did you take or contemplate?
   At what stage did you reach your decision?
   How did you feel about your decision?
   What may have encouraged you to continue your studies?

3. What impact has your decision had on you personally and

professionally?

Optional Probes:

   Anything else?
   How do you mean?
   Tell me more about your thinking on that.
   Give me an example.

**NOW I WANT TO ASK YOU TO REFLECT ON YOUR PERCEPTION OF SELF
AS A STUDENT AND YOUR THINKING ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCE IN
GENERAL.**

1. When we enter graduate school, most of us have certain

expectations of what it will be like. What were some of

the surprises you encountered?

2. As a student, which of your human qualities do you feel

were an asset in graduate school? Which were a liability

do you think? (At this time I may self-disclose to

facilitate the respondent's thinking and encourage him/her

to disclose.)

3. In the literature there is quite a lot of attention

being paid to how students' experiences differ according to

gender. For example, women have specific difficulties due

to few women faculty. How might your experience have been

different if you were male/female?

4. Based on your experience, what would you say to someone

thinking of entering the master's program in your

department?

5. At this point I would like you to describe for me your

perception of the "successful master's student".

What factors do you think would contribute most to the

smooth completion of a master's degree?

Optional Probes:

   What would be the personality traits of the graduate?
   What would motivate him/her?
   What support would he/she have? (eg. from the faculty,
   from friends and relatives, from classmates.)

FINALLY, I WOULD LIKE US TO DISCUSS HOW LIFE CIRCUMSTANCES
OUTSIDE THE UNIVERSITY INFLUENCED YOUR GRADUATE EXPERIENCE.
1. Graduate students generally have numerous

responsibilities that compete for their time. (Again, I

may share some of the stressors I experienced - ie.

juggling my time as wife, mother, part-time counsellor,

etc.)

Can you describe for me the roles, responsibilities and

other demands made on your time while a student?

Optional Probes:

   How did you handle your various responsibilities?
   How supportive of your graduate studies were your family
   and friends?
   Did anything else interfere with your studies?
   How satisfied were you with the amount of time you could
   dedicate to your school work?
   Any other frustrations you haven't mentioned?
   Are there any aspects of your experience particularly
   hard to talk about?

2. In my experience as a graduate student, financial concerns became a source of stress. Is this true of your experience?

Optional Probes:
   What type of financial support did you have while a student?
   How serious a problem was it?
   How did you handle the situation?

3. Is there anything else I ought to know to fully understand your experience as a master's student?

I HAVE ONE FINAL QUESTIONS BEFORE WE ARE DONE.

1. If the university really wanted to help more of their students finish their programs what would they do?

MANY THANKS FOR THIS. I HAVE ENJOYED THIS TIME TOGETHER AND HAVE LEARNED A LOT.

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